

Benefits 811

Chapter 811: Should I?

Lily stared down at the guy sprawled face down on the couch, his nose pressed awkwardly against the cushions. Could he even breathe like that? He hadn't moved an inch since collapsing there half an hour ago, and she wasn't sure whether she should wake him or just let him be. He'd stumbled into the kitchen pantry earlier—so maybe he'd been hungry. But if he hadn't eaten anything since last night, did that mean he'd passed out from exhaustion or was simply being lazy?

How was she supposed to wake him? Tentatively, she called his name, "Cai? Cai?" Her voice was soft, almost hesitant, but the only response she got was a faint, muffled snore. She frowned, leaning in a little closer.

Alright, time to raise the stakes.

"CAI?" she called out more firmly, "Wake up! Your breakfast is getting cold. Do you want it now, or are you planning to sleep through the entire morning?"

Still nothing—well, almost nothing. This time, he rewarded her efforts with a low, groggy grunt.

Lily rolled her eyes. She muttered under her breath, "Were you a pig in your last life or something? All you do is snort and grunt."

Just as she turned to leave, satisfied he was a lost cause, something yanked at her wrist. She let out a startled squeal as she lost her balance, tumbling backward. The next thing she knew, she landed squarely on top of him, her face inches from his, her heart racing in surprise.

He muttered, his voice groggy but amused, "Maybe I was a horse. They snort and grunt too, you know."

Lily turned her head to look at him, incredulous. He still hadn't opened his eyes, not even now. But somehow, he had already rolled over so that he was lying face up now. She squirmed, trying to push herself up, but his arms were firmly around her, keeping her trapped against him.

"Cai! Let go of me!"

But he just grinned lazily, eyes still shut, clearly in no hurry to comply as he shook his head, " "Its so cold. I like snuggling." Just as she was about ready to scream in his ears to let her go, he opened his eyes and smiled up at her," What a pretty face to wake up to."

She glared at him and pinched his arm," Let go of me."

He raised an eyebrow and slowly loosened his arm," Okay okay. I am letting go. Though, let me clarify that I am not doing this happily. Letting you go is not what I want to do. What I want to do is flip you over, bury my head in your soft cushions that I can feel against my chest and sleep..."

Lily felt a thrill go through her as she realized the meaning of his words and tried to keep herself from blushing as she pushed at him, "Let go of me... you beast!"

Lily pushed herself up quickly as soon as he loosened his hold, slipping from him as if his arms were fire, cheeks burning despite her best efforts to stay calm as she straightened her clothes, while trying to avoid looking at him.

Cai, meanwhile, stretched lazily, his eyes following her every movement with a mixture of amusement and something else she couldn't quite place and so, she did the best thing under the circumstance. Run into the kitchen.

Without a word, Cai stood up and followed her into the kitchen, letting the scent of food lead him there, only to see her already setting up the table. With a smile, he raised one finger and said," I'll be right back in a minute!" and raced to the bathroom to freshen up.

On his return, he found a plate of pancakes and another side dish of scrambled eggs and toast in front of a place setting. But nothing else while she stood staring at him, her arms crossed in front of her.

Cai looked up from his seat, raising a brow at her standoffish posture. "Not joining me?"

Lily swallowed, her throat tight. "No," she said, her voice a little sharper than she intended. She cleared her throat and tried again, more controlled. "I think it's better if we... maintain some boundaries. Since I am a housekeeper, I should not be eating with the guest."

Cai paused, blinking up at her with an expression caught between surprise and curiosity. "Boundaries?"

"Yes, what just happened..." she gestured vaguely toward the couch, still avoiding his gaze, "that was inappropriate. You might find it funny, but I'm here in a professional capacity, and I think it's best if we keep things... professional. You can tell me what you need, and I'll do my best to fulfill my duties, but we should maintain our distance."

The air thickened with silence.

Cai didn't move and simply stared at her.

Slowly, he set the fork down and leaned back in his chair, arms crossing over his chest, mirroring her stance.

"So," he said quietly, his voice calm but with an undercurrent of something far more serious than before, "you want to remain professional?"

Lily nodded, though there was a slight hesitation. "Yes."

He tilted his head, considering her for a moment longer. Then, his lips quirked into a slow, almost mischievous smile. "Okay. We can do that," he said, his voice smooth but carrying a note of challenge. "But I have a few conditions."

Lily stared. Conditions? What conditions? But even as she felt apprehensive, she nodded her head. She could try and comply with his conditions or atleast get an understanding.

"What are your conditions?"

"Full Transparency. If you want me to treat you as nothing more than the housekeeper, you need to give me some answers."

Lily felt her stomach drop. What answers did he expect her to give, when she herself had no answers and only questions...

"What do you want to ask?", Lily asked apprehensively, fearing something... And as he asked the question, she realized that her fear had been valid...

"Why did you ditch me, Lily?"

Chapter 812: Why?

"Why did you decide to ditch me?"

Lily wanted to scream. Why now? Why was he bringing this up when he hadn't even bothered to reply to her messages for weeks? Just when she thought he had moved on—just when she had convinced herself he didn't care—he throws this at her, his voice sharp and demanding.

"I didn't ditch you," she snapped, crossing her arms defensively. "I just thought there was no point in seeing each other anymore."

"No point?" Cai's voice rose, incredulous. "And why did you reach that conclusion, huh? Out of the blue?"

"It wasn't out of the blue, Cai. You..." She hesitated, trying to find the right words, but nothing sounded quite right in her head. "You're way too forward for me. It made me uncomfortable, okay? So I decided to set my boundaries."

"Forward? You think I was forward?" He scoffed, his frustration palpable. "Remind me, who asked who out?"

"Yes, I did ask you out!" Lily shot back, her temper flaring. "But that was because I felt nostalgic when I saw someone from my past. That's it! I didn't expect you to take it as an invitation to start getting... closer."

"Closer?" Cai's expression darkened. "We barely did anything! And now you're making it sound like I crossed some line."

"Maybe you didn't realize, but you have this habit of getting too close, Cai. You don't respect personal space." She took a deep breath, trying to steady herself. "And besides... I'm the little sister of your dead girlfriend. You should really maintain some distance. Or is it that you thought it would be fun to see how it was to sleep with two sisters?"

"Or is it that you thought it would be fun to see how it was to sleep with two sisters?"

The words barely left her mouth before Cai shot to his feet, slamming his hand down on the table with a loud bang. The sudden movement made Lily flinch, her heart leaping in her chest. The plates rattled, and she instinctively took a step back, her pulse racing.

For a moment, the room was filled with a tense, deafening silence. Cai stood there, his chest rising and falling with barely contained fury, but when he finally spoke, his voice was eerily calm, like a blade drawn quietly from its sheath.

"I had no idea," he said, his eyes hard and cold, "that this is what you thought of me."

His words were quiet, but they hit her harder than if he'd been shouting. Lily swallowed, but she couldn't find a response as he continued, his tone controlled, deliberate.

"All we did, Lily, was a little harmless flirting," Cai said, his voice steady, each word pronounced with precision. "Nothing more. But clearly, you've taken that and twisted it into something else in your head."

Lily opened her mouth, but no words came out. She could feel the sting of regret building in her chest, but Cai wasn't finished.

"As for sleeping with your sister..." He paused, and the cold intensity of his gaze made her stomach churn. "You seem to forget that she was sixteen when she died from her illness. I never slept with her." His voice sharpened. "But thank you, Lily, for clarifying where your mind's been."

He exhaled slowly, the tension in the air thick between them. He gave her a slow, deliberate once-over, his expression hardening further, while she felt as if she was the one who was being suffocated. She wanted to say something but the words were stuck in her throat as he continued.

"Now that I know where you stand," he said, pushing his chair back with a scrape, "I'll be sure to maintain my distance."

His words stung, a cold finality to them that made her chest tighten and she had to remind herself that it was good that he was going to maintain his distance. Cai's hands rested on the table for a moment, and then, with a calm that belied the storm brewing beneath the surface, he slowly pushed the plate in front of him aside. The simple motion felt like a dismissal.

"I'm not hungry anymore." His eyes flicked up to hers, cold and detached. "And I'd appreciate it if Miss Housekeeper would stay out of my way from now on."

Lily felt the air drain from the room. Her throat tightened, but before she could respond, Cai spoke again, his voice low, but with enough venom to pierce her.

"I can cook for myself. I don't need anyone, least of all you."

She watched him leave and somehow, the feeling of relief she had expected did not come, only letting her feel guilt. Before Cai reached the door, he paused, however, speaking without turning around. "And Lily," he said, his voice lower now, almost a whisper, "you might want to think twice before you make assumptions about people. Not everyone is as careless with others' feelings as you are."

The door clicked shut behind Cai, and Lily stood frozen, her heart pounding in her chest.

For the rest of the morning, Lily tried to occupy herself, but her thoughts kept drifting back to Cai. She busied herself with cleaning, rearranging the living room furniture, and cleaning the already clean nooks and crannies, all in an effort to distract herself from the gnawing guilt that twisted in her stomach. But no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't shake the image of his hurt expression or the icy finality in his voice.

As lunch approached, she found herself glancing at the clock, feeling even more guilty that he was probably starving himself because of her.

Finally, she decided to check the kitchen, hoping he might have come out for something to eat. But the house remained eerily quiet, the tension thick enough to cut with a knife. Just as she turned to leave, she heard the unmistakable sound of the pantry door creaking open.

She watched as Cai stepped inside, his back turned to her. The sight of him made her stomach drop; he looked so rigid, so closed off. She opened her mouth, ready to say something—anything—but before she could find her voice, he emerged from the pantry, a cup of instant noodles in hand.

Instead of speaking, she watched him grab the hot water kettle from the counter, his movements quick and efficient. It was as if he couldn't get away from her fast enough.

"Cai," she finally managed to say, her voice barely above a whisper, but he didn't look back. He poured the hot water into the cup noodles and then just left...

Chapter 813: Sick

Lily woke up shivering. Her gaze drifted to the ceiling as she snuggled deeper into the blankets. She didn't want to get out of bed. It wasn't just her horrid mood weighing her down, but the deep, dull ache spreading through her limbs, the kind that hinted at the onset of a fever. Her body felt chilled, even wrapped in the cocoon of blankets, and the mere thought of moving seemed unbearable.

The last two days had been agonizing for her. Cai's coldness was suffocating, the way he completely ignored her, as if she were invisible. Living in this oppressive silence had made every moment feel heavier, darker. She had wanted to apologize, to bridge the gap between them, but he'd shut her out so completely, treating her like she was nothing more than an annoying, buzzing mosquito, too insignificant to even swat away. She'd wanted to apologize but he had ignored her as if she were nothing but a buzzing mosquito.

With a weary sigh, she closed her eyes and glanced blearily around the room. Since she was already invisible to him, she might as well embrace it. There was no reason to get up today, no reason to face his indifference. She would stay in bed, let the world pass by without her, and maybe later, if she found the strength, she'd get up to make something simple for herself. But for now, the blankets were her refuge, and she wasn't ready to leave their warmth just yet.

Cai sat on the couch, the medical journal in his hand barely registering as he stared at the closed bedroom door. His fingers absently flipped a page, but his eyes were locked on the door as if, by sheer will, it would turn transparent, revealing Lily inside. He shifted in his seat, adjusting his posture, trying to shake the nagging feeling creeping up on him. She hadn't come out since this morning.

He frowned, closing the journal with a snap and tossing it onto the coffee table. His gaze lingered on the door, and his jaw clenched as he leaned back against the cushions. What's she doing in there? he wondered. The silence worried him. She should have come out to eat something at the very least.

His fingers tapped against the arm of the couch before he finally pushed himself up and marched to her door. Standing in front of the door, however, he hesitated, hand hovering over the knob, listening for any sign of movement. Nothing. Finally, he knocked. But there was no answer.

"Lily?" He waited, his ear straining for even the smallest sound. When there was no reply, he knocked again, louder this time. "Are you okay?"

Still no response. His brow furrowed. He turned the knob slowly, pushing the door open just a crack, peeking inside.

Lily was curled up under a mountain of blankets, barely a lump on the bed. Her eyes were closed, and even in sleep, there was a heaviness to her breathing that sounded not normal.

"Lily?" His voice softened as he stepped into the room, and moved to stand beside the bed. Her face was all red. He leaned down and checked her forehead. Her skin felt warm—too warm.

She stirred at his touch, her eyes fluttering open, bleary and unfocused. "Cai?" she murmured weakly.

"You're burning up." She blinked at him and then closed her eyes, wondering why she was imagining him. She felt a shiver run through her as she stirred and she caught the blanket closer around her and closed her eyes. Her lids were too heavy for her to keep them open.

When he returned, bowl in hand, the sight of her still curled under the blankets tugged at his heart. "Hey. I brought you some soup."

Lily stirred again while he placed the bowl on small bedside table and watched as her eyelids fluttered open slightly. "Soup?" she echoed, her voice barely above a whisper as if the word was foreign to her.

"Yeah, but first, you need to sit up a little." He reached out to her and caught her shoulders, gently making her sit up. "Come on, just for a minute."

She shook her head, and struggled to move back in. "I don't want to..."

Cai sighed, "I get it, but you have to eat something. It'll help and then you can take medicine." With a careful motion, he slipped his arm around her and lifted her slightly, bracing her against him as she instinctively leaned into him.

She smiled for a moment, "You're so warm. I want a blanket like you."

He laid her against the back of the bed and murmured, "Have some soup and you'll feel warm too."

"I don't feel well. I don't want to eat. I want a warm blanket like you."

"I promise, if you drink some soup, you can snuggle against me as long as you want." Cai tried to coax her as he picked up the bowl and after blowing on the piping food, he brought it to her lips.. She drank slowly, however, as the hot soup made her feel warm from the inside, she felt herself feeling sleepy.

When she refused to open her mouth anymore, Cai placed the bowl of soup aside and quickly helped her lie down again before getting up to move away.

But before he could go out, Lily caught his wrist and pouted, "You promised... I am so cold."

Feeling apprehensive, he settled back on the edge of the bed, and Lily instinctively curled toward him, seeking his warmth. She place her head on his chest and threw her arms and legs over him.

Cai looked down at the girl who was now already asleep and a small smile tugged on his face. Just who was the one who did not respect boundaries and got too close? Sigh, with an arm around her, he gently patted her head, letting her sleep while treating him like a cozy personal pillow.

Chapter 814: Taking Care

The next two days blended into a comforting routine for Lily and Cai. He transformed into a living blanket, keeping her warm while she recovered. Occasionally, he would coax her to let go, slipping out of bed to prepare food, urging her to eat and take her medicine. But most of the time, he remained close, offering comfort when she felt chilled and retreating when her fever broke.

By the morning of the third day, Lily awoke feeling different—lighter, as if the heaviness had lifted. She opened her eyes slowly, only to realize she was hugging something exceptionally warm. Her heart raced as she snapped her eyes open and recognized Cai beside her. The memories of the last two days rushed back, flooding her with embarrassment and a sense of scandal at her own clingy behaviour.

In a quick motion, she rolled away from him, her cheeks burning with shame. The sudden movement stirred Cai, who blinked sleepily before focusing on her as his hand instinctively moved to her forehead. She leaned back and his eyes met hers then. Almost immediately, the soft expression he held shifted into indifference.

"It's good that your fever has finally broken," he said, while pushing the blanket away and standing up and turning away, his back to her.

"Cai, I—" she started, trying to find the right words.

"You should freshen up. I'll leave some freshly prepared soup outside. That will make you feel much better. After all, you've been sick for two days." he replied, cutting her off.

With that, he walked out of the room, leaving her in stunned silence. The last two days had given her a glimpse of the real Cai. He had been so caring and patient with her, as if she meant the world to him. But the moment she had recovered a bit, he had coldly ordered her to freshen up and then walked out of there as if they were nothing but strangers.

After a moment of reflection, she took a deep breath, willing herself to shake off the lingering unease and weakness she felt. She knew she needed to freshen up and confront him again. She couldn't let this

chance slip away. At least he was pitying her at the moment, so she could probably get some forgiveness.

After a few minutes of gathering her thoughts, Lily splashed water on her face and brushed her hair, feeling a bit more like herself.

With a sense of resolve, she opened the door and stepped out into the hallway. The scent of something savory wafted through the air, guiding her toward the kitchen. As she approached, she spotted Cai emerging from the pantry, a bowl of soup in one hand and a plate piled high with bread in the other.

"You can have some soup and bread," he said without looking up, his tone clipped as he moved past her.

Before he could walk away, something inside her propelled her to act. She reached out, catching the sleeve of his jacket and giving it a gentle tug. Cai paused and turned to face her, eyebrows raised in surprise.

"Do you need something?" he asked, his voice steady but lacking warmth.

Lily shook her head at first, but then hurriedly nodded, her heart racing. "I... I want to apologize."

"Apologize for what?"

She hesitated, biting her lip as she gathered her thoughts. "I said some mean things that weren't really truthful. I feel horrible for it. I let my feelings get the best of me, and I didn't think about how it would affect you. You hadn't done anything to deserve them."

Cai stared at her before moving away and placing the food in his hand on the table. "I appreciate your apology. For now, you need to eat something and regain some strength. Have a seat."

Lily stared at him. While he was still being a gentleman, and even acknowledged her apology, he had not said that he had forgiven her or accepted the apology.

She moved to sit on the chair and then looked down at the food before asking, "Won't you forgive me? I am truly sorry..."

After a moment, he turned to face her, his expression unreadable. "It's not about whether I forgive you or not," he said slowly, choosing his words carefully. "It's about what you do next. Apologies are just words if they aren't backed up by actions. You reacted defensively and attacked me with your words because you did not want to answer a question. So, unless you have your answers ready, there is no point in your apology."

Lily looked up at him then. She was not really prepared to answer that. How was she supposed to tell him that she was too involved in this matter and so she had decided to step back. How her feelings were such a mess when it came to him. She was not even able to separate this man now from the boy she had a crush on as a child. And then there was the entire matter of Jasmine.

He seemed to understand her silence as not being ready to talk. With a sigh, he turned back and started to walk away. Somehow, Lily knew that if she did not answer truthfully this time, he might never ask her the question again. So, she gathered her courage and called out, "Stop, please."

"I truly am sorry for everything. For my words that day and for my actions. The truth is... look, there are some complications from my end and that is the reason for my decision to pull away from you. I don't even know how to explain these things. It might feel like I am making a mountain out of a molehill, but the truth is that everything is indeed complicated."

"Well you could try explaining," Cai said softly before returning to take a seat opposite her.

"Tell me, Lily. What is it that is going on in your head? Talking might help..."

Chapter 815: Alright.

"Talking might help." Lily's gaze lingered on the back of the head of the person sitting on the couch, her thoughts swirling with unspoken words. She sighed softly. He had offered to talk, had given her the perfect opportunity to explain everything, but instead, she'd faltered, letting her fear get the better of her. Like a coward, she'd simply shaken her head, muttering that she couldn't explain it. At least he hadn't pressed her for more. He'd only nodded in understanding, his silence heavy with acceptance.

Even though he'd told her he'd forgiven her and had even invited her to watch TV with him, the weight of her guilt pressed down on her, refusing to let go. She just couldn't bring herself to move past it, no

matter how much she wanted to. For now, though, she had the convenient excuse of being unwell. So, with that thought in mind, she quietly grabbed the thermos of water she had brought with her, slinking back to the sanctuary of her room.

Once inside, she slipped under the covers, pulling the blanket close as if it could shield her from the turmoil in her mind. She resolutely shut her eyes, hoping that sleep would offer some reprieve from the thoughts that plagued her.

But sleep refused to come.

There was one very odd and frustrating reason for that—she was sensitive to smells. And all she could focus on, as she lay in this bed, was his scent. Despite the fact that he had changed the sheets earlier, it clung to the air, to the pillows, to everything around her. It was as if his presence still lingered next to her, an invisible weight she couldn't escape.

With a deep, exasperated sigh, Lily reached for her phone, desperate to anchor her mind to anything that didn't involve Cai. She scrolled through her messages, her eyes scanning the endless string of texts, until finally, she landed on something familiar—Meredith. Thankfully, her friend had sent about a hundred messages since the last time they'd spoken, and it was exactly the distraction Lily needed.

Lily unlocked her phone and scrolled through the endless stream of messages from Meredith. The latest one caught her eye: "Okay, seriously, where are you? Did you drop off the face of the earth or get buried in snow or something? At least tell me that you've been kidnapped by some hot alien in that wilderness. It's been days! Are you okay?"

Lily couldn't help but smile at her friend's dramatic concern. She took a moment before typing her response. "Unfortunately, I have not been abducted by a handsome alien. I did fall into the grasp of a fever, but before you bombard me with messages, I am doing better now."

Almost immediately, her phone buzzed with Meredith's reply. "What?? A fever?? And you didn't tell me? How high was it? Did you see a doctor? Are there even doctors in that place? What if something had happened to you? It is just not a safe place, Lily! Come back. You're too impulsive. Heck, if you want to date that doctor, I'll even help you. Just be safe."

Lily stilled at this message. 'That doctor' was right here. It was odd, she had escaped the world, only to be cut off from it and get stuck with him.

"I was not alone, Meredith. I was well taken care of. This place is alright. Even though it is surrounded by wilderness, there is every facility here one can think of. See, I don't even have a problem with messaging.. There is a satelliet powered wifi..."

A little while later, as Lily stared at the missing signal bars on her phone, she realized she had spoken too soon. It was not even afternoon and the world outside had turned dark, while the lights had already flickered off and now, only a dim light lit the room. Apparently, the generator was working but since this could be the beginning of a thunder storm that could last for no one knew how long... things were supposed to be used sparingly.

But as soon as Lily sent the message, she felt a slight pang of irony. She glanced at her phone screen, staring at the missing signal bars. She'd spoken too soon. Just then, the lights flickered, dimming the room to a dull glow, and she realized the world outside had already darkened. The wind had picked up, and the faint sound of snow hitting the window could be heard. The power was still on, thanks to the generator, but it wouldn't last long if the storm was as bad as it seemed. They had to conserve.

Lily sighed heavily and glanced around the room. What was she supposed to do now? She stood up and moved to the window, trying to peer outside, but all she could see was her own reflection staring back at her in the dim light, with little flecks of snow swirling in the air beyond.

She wondered, briefly, what Cai was doing. Then she shook her head, forcing the thought away. There was no point in thinking about him right now. But as if summoned by her thoughts, a knock echoed through the room, startling her. She opened the door to see Cai standing there with a grin plastered on his face. "Are you bored?" he asked, his tone light and teasing.

Before she could even answer, he turned on his heel, already walking away, his voice carrying back to her as he spoke. "If you're bored, come outside with me. I've got something interesting to do. We need to get our ducks in a row before the storm really hits."

Lily frowned, puzzled by his words. Ducks in a row? What did he mean by that? Was there some issue with their preparations for the winter storm? What exactly were they about to face?

Curiosity piqued, she hesitated for only a moment before grabbing her jacket and following him out the door. If he needed help with something, she could do it.

Chapter 816: The Ducks and Penguins

Lily was confused. As she followed him out of the room and then watched him go outside the house, she was thoroughly confused. Just what had happened that he wanted to go out in this snow? She stepped out into the cold, tugging her jacket tighter as she followed Cai around the side of the house.

The wind had already started to pick up, sending little flurries of snow swirling in the air around them.

Her confusion deepened when she finally stopped beside him and stared down at the odd shapes in his hands. Moulds. Snow moulds?

She blinked, then looked up at him, her brows knitting together in bewilderment. Cai, on the other hand, was beaming like a kid on Christmas morning, his grin wide and mischievous. "You're joking," she said flatly, though her lips twitched in the beginnings of a smile.

"Nope," Cai replied, the excitement in his voice unmistakable. He nodded to the molds in his hand—one shaped like a duck and another like a penguin. "We need to get our ducks in a row. Literally." He crouched down in the snow, demonstrating how to fill the molds, packing the snow into each one with a precision that made Lily chuckle.

"You mean to tell me," she said slowly, still staring at the snow molds, "that your big plan to prepare for the storm... is to make an army of snowball ducks and penguins?"

"Exactly," Cai replied with a straight face, though the twinkle in his eye betrayed his amusement. "We're building the Bird Frost Army—the most formidable army this side of the wilderness." He dusted off his gloves and handed her one of the freshly made snow ducks. "Are you in, or are you too chicken to prepare for the battle of the Frosts?"

Lily narrowed her eyes at him, the challenge in his voice sparking something playful in her. She hadn't felt this kind of lightheartedness in a long time. Maybe it was the fever that had left her feeling weak, or maybe it was the ridiculousness of the situation, but she couldn't help herself. Without another word, she knelt and started packing a mould.

"Alright, fine," she said, pressing the snow firmly into the penguin mould. "But only because I don't want to be outnumbered when your ducks try to take over the porch."

Cai laughed, the sound warm despite the cold wind swirling around them. "That's the spirit!" he said, handing her another duck mold. "By the time the storm hits, Bird Frosts will be the greatest snow army this side of the mountain. The balustrade will be fortified with penguins, and no one—no one—will be able to breach our defenses."

Lily snorted at the theatrics but found herself getting caught up in the ridiculousness of it all. They worked side by side, their breath coming out in little puffs of steam as they packed snow into the molds, one after another. The ducks and penguins started to pile up, lining the porch, their little snowball faces looking out over the snowy landscape like sentinels.

An hour passed, and then another, but neither of them noticed the time. Lily's fingers were cold and stiff in her gloves, but she didn't care. For the first time in days, she felt like she was doing something fun, something that didn't weigh her down with misery.

By the time they finished, the porch was covered in neat rows of snowball ducks and penguins, each one standing proudly on the balustrade, as if guarding the house from the incoming storm. Cai stood back, admiring their work with a satisfied grin. "Look at that," he said, his voice full of pride. "Bird Frosts are ready for battle."

Lily shook her head, unable to suppress a laugh. "This is absolutely ridiculous," she said, though her heart felt lighter than it had in days. "But I have to admit, it's kind of impressive."

"Ridiculous? No way," Cai shot back, feigning offense. "This is strategic genius. These ducks and penguins are the first line of defense. They'll confuse the enemy, distract them with their sheer numbers and cuteness. By the time the storm hits, we'll be safe inside, and they'll be out here doing all the hard work."

Lily snorted again but couldn't stop the smile that tugged at her lips. "Strategic genius, huh? You really put a lot of thought into this, didn't you?"

Cai shrugged, still grinning. "What can I say? I'm a man of many talents. Snowball duck general is just one of them."

"Thanks, Cai," Lily said quietly, her voice barely louder than the wind. She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye, feeling a sudden surge of gratitude for the silliness of it all. For taking her mind off everything else, even if just for a little while.

"Oh come one! There is nothing in this to thank me for! Honestly! I've always wanted to make these! These moulds were the first thing I packed when I was coming here..."

She brushed the snow from her gloves and stared at him, "I don't know whether to be impressed or worried about your priorities."

Cai gave her a mock serious nod. "Oh, absolutely. You can never be too prepared for an impending snowstorm—snowball ducks and penguins are essential survival gear." He dusted the last bit of snow from his jacket, gesturing toward the house. "Now come on, before we freeze out here. I make a mean hot chocolate."

"Alright," she said, falling into step beside him as they made their way back inside. "But if your hot chocolate isn't up to par, I'm sending those snow penguins after you."

Cai chuckled, opening the door and ushering her in. "Fair enough. But just so you know, I've never been defeated in a hot chocolate challenge."

She smiled and watched him go into the kitchen. She couldn't help but wonder if Cai Frost had ever been defeated in any challenge, let alone a hot chocolate one. She doubted that.

Chapter 817: Playtime

"What are you, a kid?" Lily laughed, stepping carefully out of the cabin and glancing at Cai, who was now bent on playing tic-tac-toe in the snow. Despite her teasing, she couldn't deny the sheer amount of fun she'd had during the past three days of being snowed in. The snowstorm had forced them to stay inside, cocooned in the warmth of the cabin, but somehow it had been exactly what she needed—relaxing, refreshing, and a break from the weight she carried.

She sighed softly, watching as Cai diligently drew the grid for their game, his cheeks flushed from the cold. Shaking her head with a half-smile, she found herself caught off guard by the unexpected lightness in her chest. It had been a long time since she'd felt anything like this—peaceful, content, even... happy.

And for the first time in ages, Jasmine crossed her mind, not with bitterness, but with a kind of quiet fondness that surprised her.

After sending another glance his way, she turned her head away, her eyes taking in the buried Bird army. It was all snow now, but even so, she knew somewhere below that, their little army had been buried. And she didn't know but it reminded her of Jasmine.

With a sudden pang, she pressed a hand to her chest and closed her eyes. Jasmine had been the one who always dragged her into some adventure or playful mischief when they were younger. Her older sister's infectious energy had once been irresistible. "Did you send him to me, Jasmine?" she whispered under her breath, her voice barely audible. "To remind me not to hate you?"

A familiar ache rose in her throat, and tears welled up in her eyes. It had been so long since she'd thought of her sister with anything other than anger. Jasmine's illness, those last years of helpless suffering, and then her death—it had all been too much. When Lily finally escaped her parents and the oppressive weight of their grief, she had shoved all thoughts of the past aside. She didn't want to remember. All she'd allowed herself to feel was the resentment, the unfairness of it all.

"Lily!!" Cai's voice suddenly rang out, cutting through her thoughts.

She quickly blinked back the tears threatening to spill, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand before turning toward him. "What?" she called back, trying to sound casual.

"Come on and play!" he urged, his bright, eager face lighting up as he pointed at the nine neatly drawn boxes in the snow.

A smile tugged at her lips despite herself. "You're ridiculous," she muttered, but she found her feet moving toward him anyway. Maybe a game of tic-tac-toe in the snow was just what she needed.

"Yep, let's see how good you really are!" Lily teased, moving to the edge of the grid. "I'm taking X's." She crouched down to write X but Cai muttered, "Hey! You're not supposed to use hands."

Lily looked at him and rolled her eyes. Of course, he couldn't keep it simple. She lifted her foot and carefully dragged the toe of her boot through the snow, making an uneven but visible "X" in the top-left

corner. "You do realise we could have played this on a piece of paper as well, without trying to freeze ourselves in this cold."

Cai laughed, his eyes gleaming. "There is no fun in that!" He stepped forward with an exaggerated flourish and dragged his boot across the center box, scraping out a shaky "O" in the snow. He stepped back, clearly pleased with himself. "Still the best spot!"

"Of course," Lily muttered, rolling her eyes but grinning as she carefully walked around the grid, trying not to disturb the lines. She positioned herself near the bottom-right corner and, with deliberate concentration, scraped another "X" into the snow using the side of her boot. It wasn't perfect, but it would do. "Your move."

Cai examined the grid, grinning as he stepped forward. He wobbled a little, but he managed to scrape an "O" in the top-right box without falling over. "Almost there!" he declared, giving her a challenging look.

Lily laughed, "Not if I can help it," she said, walking over to the middle-left box. Carefully balancing on one foot, she traced a jagged "X" into the snow with the toe of her boot, then stood back to admire her work, having blocked him successfully.

He stomped over to the bottom-left corner, sweeping his foot dramatically to form his next "O." "You've been blocked!" he said, stepping back triumphantly.

They both stood there for a moment, after making more moves, and then looked at the wonky grid with its crooked X's and O's scattered across the snow. After a few seconds, Cai burst out laughing. "It's a draw!" the sound of his laughter echoing through the cold, quiet air.

"Well, come on, we need to make more grids...I have to win against you," Cai muttered but this time, Lily shook her head, " Nope! Not it is my turn to choose! And we are making a snowman. It's decided."

"Hey! Snowman's are boring."

"Well, they are not to me! I am going to make one! And I think you are scared to do it because it might not turn out well."

Cai narrowed his eyes, "Is that a challenge? I'll tell you what, I am going to make a snow-woman! And one of a kind! Lets see who does it well then."

"Do you have to make everything a competition?"

"Of course I have to! And this time, you are the one who laid down the challenge! Lets see who does well. Since, it is your first time, I will even give you a chance to begin first! I am going to go inside and put on some soup. And when I return, I am going to show your snowman what a real snow figure is."

With laughter, Lily watched him go and sighed. Well, even if it was a competition, it was going to be fun, making a snow man. She rubbed her gloved hands together and immediately got to work.

Chapter 818: Snow Woman

As expected, Cai stepped outside exactly fifteen minutes later and hurriedly moved backwards, ready to get to work. Lily, sent him a quick glance and then turned toward the pile of snow she had already started gathering. Why did it look so easy to make but would not take shape! Since it was a competition, she wanted the snowman to be perfect- round, classic and worthy of praise.

She crouched down, rolling the base of the snowman with her hands, feeling the cold seeping through her gloves, but she didn't mind, only praying that she did not end up getting frost bite.

Unable to stop herself, she turned around to glance at him, only for him to glare at her as he warned, "Don't even think of cheating or peeping!" She shook her head. He'd been working in silence behind her, but the moment she turned around, he got all fierce, scooping up snow in exaggerated motions, clearly determined to outdo her.

Shrugging, she turned to face her snowman and every so often, she could hear him muttering to himself, and she smirked as she imagined his ridiculous creation coming to life. How was he going to make a snowwoman was beside her.

Finally, she looked down at the perfect large sphere she had created and called out, "How's it going back there, snow-master?". With her base ready, she was now packing the middle section of her snowman on top of the base. She turned for a quick glance, but Cai was hunched over, hiding whatever he was working on. Suspicious. "Oh, you're really focused, huh? Must be good!"

"Oh, it's better than good," Cai replied with a mischievous grin that immediately made Lily suspicious.
"You're going to love it. And stop turning around will you?"

Shaking her head, she turned back to her snowman, carefully shaping the middle now, as she wondered what it was she could use to make his buttons. And then, after a long time, she started on the head, making sure it was perfectly round not that she knew the trick.. Once done, she quickly raced inside and brought out two little bowls for eyes and a spoon for his mouth

She stepped back, admiring her work. "Well, mine's done!" she announced proudly. "A classic snowman if I do say so myself. What about you?"

Cai didn't respond right away. His silence made her uneasy. Had his snow woman come out that well?

Lily turned around, dusting off her gloves, and walked toward him. "Cai? What are you—"

Her words caught in her throat as she saw what he'd been up to. Standing in the snow was a surprisingly detailed snow sculpture. It was a snow woman alright.... But why did that snow woman look like her?

And not just any version of her. Cai had sculpted a caricature of her with exaggerated curves, focusing heavily on her chest, which he was now meticulously shaping with his hands.. His face was the picture of concentration as he worked on carving out the breasts of the snow-woman, adding way too much detail for Lily's liking.

Her jaw dropped. "Cai!" she sputtered, feeling a mix of shock and embarrassment creeping up her neck, her face turning red as she looked at what his hands were doing. "What the hell are you doing?!"

He looked up, his innocent expression failing to hide the amusement twinkling in his eyes as he raised his hands and stepped back. "What? I did say I was making a snow-woman, so I made one. I figured it'd be a tribute to you."

Lily's face flushed, half from the cold, half from sheer mortification. "I didn't think you meant that kind of snow-woman!" she exclaimed, stepping forward to inspect the sculpture more closely, her mouth hanging open. "Oh my God, Cai! You made it so... so..."

"Realistic?" he offered with a grin.

She glared at him, though she couldn't fully suppress the embarrassing laughter bubbling up inside her. "You made me look like some ridiculous cartoon character... like Lola bunny!" she cried, covering her face with her hands. "What if someone sees this?"

"Relax, it's just us out here in the middle of nowhere." Cai stood back to admire his handiwork, clearly proud of himself. "Besides, it's art. You should feel flattered. Also, take note that I have given you normal ears and not bunny ears, but if you want them, I can add the little detail..."

"Flattered?! You gave me snow-boobs!" Lily couldn't help but laugh now, despite her best efforts to stay serious. "You're ridiculous!"

Cai shrugged, brushing the snow off his hands. "Maybe, but admit it—you're impressed. It is impressive, after all..."

Lily shook her head, still laughing as tears streamed from her eyes. "Impressed? No. Horrified? Yes."

She took a step forward, grabbed a handful of snow and packed it tightly. "This is what you get for being a perv!"

Cai yelped, scrambling back as he laughed, quickly scooping up a handful of snow in retaliation. "Hey! I was just being creative! And don't harm her, okay! I have to take a picture of her and you! You know, in case I cannot be a doctor anymore, I can become a snow sculptor."

Though, Lily wanted to absolutely refute standing next to the snow sculpture, she was ultimately convinced by Cai who insisted on getting a picture.

Cai studied the photo for a second, a smirk playing on his lips as he glanced at her. "You know, it really does look like you. Especially this part." He gestured vaguely toward the chest area of the snow-woman.

Lily, already blushing, threw him an exasperated look. "You're impossible. And that is not me, okay. I don't have those proportions," she said, shaking her head.

But then, before she could react, Cai took a step closer, his grin turning wicked and somewhat lethal. "You know," he started, lowering his voice just a notch, "if you think it is not, I could make a few... adjustments to the sculpture." His eyes twinkled with amusement. "Let me just measure the original"

Her eyes widened as Cai raised his arms and to walk towards her, intent on 'measuring' her and with a squeal she raced inside, her heart hammering in her chest.

Chapter 819: Nostalgia

It felt like a dream. Lily stood by the window, gazing out at the endless blanket of snow that stretched across the landscape. The world outside seemed frozen in time, untouched by the hustle of life. A month had passed in the blink of an eye, and yet not once had she felt 'bored.' She'd been sure she would, despite the endless books available. But honestly, it was the presence of Cai here that made it all seem like a big dream. The isolation of the cabin, nestled in the mountains, had been almost healing.

Soon, the snowstorms would start to recede, and they would finally be able to make the trek to the small town a few miles away. But despite that prospect, a quiet fear gnawed at Lily. What if, when the snow melted, this dream would fade away too?

A light tap on her shoulder snapped her out of her thoughts. She turned to see Cai standing beside her, his breath fogging the cold glass as he leaned against the window, looking out at the same view. "Are you trying to melt the snow with that concentrated gaze of yours?" he teased. And there that was. The smile and the tease. Always there.

Lily smiled softly, shaking her head. "Nope. I don't have that kind of power. I was just... thinking."

"Thinking?" Cai quirked an eyebrow, shifting to face her more fully. "That's a dangerous thing to do in a place like this. Too much time in your own head and you'll start getting all philosophical. And then you will want to start writing down your thoughts and become some big philosopher."

Lily laughed, "Oh, and you're not philosophical? I don't think I've ever met a man whose thoughts are as clear and methodical as yours. You're quite the deep thinker, Cai."

He shrugged, leaning back against the window. As their shoulders brushed, Lily's breath caught but Cai seemed unfazed even unaware of the little touch, though his gaze softened as he looked at her.

"Actually," he said, "I don't think."

She blinked. "You don't think you're philosophical? That's hard to believe."

"No," Cai corrected, turning to her again. "I mean, I don't have deep thoughts like that. I don't spend hours pondering the meaning of life or what could've been. I just... think of the future, of what's in front of me, and follow my gut. My dad always told me to trust my instincts. As long as I'm not out to harm anyone and I consider other people's feelings, he said it's okay to follow my own path. No matter what anyone else says."

Lily nodded, her smile growing a little wistful. "Your father sounds like a wise man." If only her parents had a little bit of that wisdom.

Cai's eyes flickered with a brief but fond look. "Yeah, he is. He's been through a lot. He taught me that life's too short to overthink everything. You've just got to act sometimes. Let your heart lead." She gave a bitter smile then but even lost in her own thought, she failed to notice the enigmatic gaze that Cai sent her way.

They fell into a comfortable silence after that, both lost in their thoughts, watching as the snowflakes lazily drifted down from the sky. It was the kind of silence that felt heavy, not awkward, but filled with unspoken questions and feelings.

After a moment, Lily glanced at Cai out of the corner of her eye, then shifted her gaze down to her hands, fidgeting slightly. She hesitated before speaking again, her voice quieter this time. "Do you... ever think about Jasmine?"

Cai tensed beside her, his body stiffening at the mention of that name. For a moment, he didn't respond, and Lily regretted bringing it up. This was only the second time she had mentioned Jasmine since they'd been here, and the first time—well, it had been in those accusations that she wasn't eager to revisit.

"Hmm," Cai finally said, his tone careful, guarded. "I think of Jasmine. Just... not often."

He turned to face her fully now, his expression unreadable. Lily couldn't meet his gaze, not at first. Instead, she looked back out at the snow, her fingers twisting together.

Without waiting for a response, she turned to leave, the weight of her words suddenly feeling too heavy to bear. But before she could take more than a step, Cai caught her wrist, pulling her gently back toward him. The sudden motion threw her off balance, and she stumbled, falling against him. For a brief moment, she felt the warmth of his chest beneath her palms, his breath steady and close. Then, just as quickly, he let go, stepping back to give her space.

"Lily," Cai's voice was soft but firm, his gaze steady on hers. "Jasmine is not a taboo topic, okay? You don't have to feel guilty for bringing her up. If you want to talk about your sister or think of her, there's no reason you shouldn't. We do have her in common. In fact, she is the reason we know each other."

Lily swallowed hard, her eyes darting away. She couldn't quite meet his gaze, not with the raw emotion that lingered in the air between them. "I just... I didn't want to make it harder for you. I know how much you cared for her."

Cai let out a slow breath, crossing his arms as he leaned back against the window. "Yes, it's painful when I think about how young she was when her life was cut short. It's always going to hurt, remembering that. But you're right—I did love her, Lily. I loved her with the intensity of a teenage boy, the kind of love that burns bright and fast." His lips twitched in a faint smile. "But I'm not still pining for her, or trapped in some place where I can't talk about her. It's been years... I've had time to come to terms with it."

"I know... your parents can still not talk about her. I spoke to them recently and they were quite uncomfortable about it still. It is also one of the reasons why I never brought up Jasmine with you, in case you were uncomfortable too."

Lily looked up at him in shock, "You spoke to my parents? When? I thought you were out of contact with them after Jasmine.."

"I invited them to Petrovia.... The research centre that I established there. I named the children's ward after Jasmine. I invited them to inaugurate the place. It felt right, you know? To honor her memory in a way that would help others. I thought it might bring some peace to them, to know that Jasmine's name was living on in something so important." He sighed, rubbing the back of his neck. I had planned to invite you too, Lily, but..."

As he sent a glance her way, she realized two things. One, she'd asked him to not contact her again. And secondly, he was probably the reason her parents had been in Petrovia.

Chapter 820: Memories

"We often talked about you, Lily."

Lily's gaze snapped up to meet Cai's, a question forming on her lips, but he had already turned and started walking away. She hurried after him, her voice chasing him down the hall. "Wait, what do you mean you talked about me? You can't just drop a bomb like that and walk away. That's not fair!"

Cai grinned over his shoulder and, with a casual flop, sank into the couch. He patted the empty space beside him, signaling her to join. "Come sit. I'll explain."

Reluctantly, but intrigued, Lily walked over and settled beside him, turning so that she could face him properly. Cai grabbed a cushion, hugging it to his chest, his expression thoughtful as he started to speak.

"Well, you know, we were just two dumb teenagers, right? Jasmine used to joke that she'd dump me before we even made it out of high school."

Lily blinked, utterly taken aback. To her, Jasmine and Cai had always seemed inseparable, like the kind of couple that was meant to last forever. They were the epitome of young love, at least from the outside looking in.

Cai caught the surprise on her face and laughed softly. "Ha! I see you're shocked. But think about it, how many couples do you really know that have stayed together since high school? Forever's a long time."

"There are exceptions," Lily protested, though her mind reeled. Jasmine and Cai were supposed to be one of those rare exceptions. Weren't they?

Cai shrugged, nonchalant but with a hint of wistfulness. "Sure, exceptions exist. And maybe we could have been one of them. But Jasmine... she had doubts. And a lot of those doubts had to do with you."

Lily stared at him, feeling her chest tighten. "Me?" she echoed, pointing at herself as if he might be talking about someone else.

Cai's lips curled into a knowing smile, his eyes soft with an emotion she couldn't quite place. "Yeah. You. According to Jasmine, if we stayed together, I'd eventually leave her. Because of you."

Lily's mouth fell open in disbelief. "That's ridiculous."

"Is it?" Cai's voice was gentle, but there was an edge of something heavier beneath it. "She said you looked at me like I hung the moon and stars, and she could never look at me like that. She thought, one day, I'd get swept up in all that admiration."

Lily flushed. "I... I did have a crush on you. I won't deny that. But I didn't think Jasmine ever noticed."

"Oh, she noticed," Cai said, leaning back against the cushions, his expression growing distant, as if recalling old memories. "And it worried her. Not just because of me, but because of you. She didn't want you to be hurt. She was always thinking about how you'd feel after she left."

Lily frowned, the weight of his words settling in. "After she left..."

Cai nodded, and his tone shifted, becoming more serious. "Yeah. We talked about that a lot. She was worried about how things were at home for you, too. Your parents—well, they loved her, sure, but they were biased, weren't they? Once they realized how exceptional Jasmine was at school and saw that you weren't measuring up to their expectations... the way they treated you changed. Jasmine saw that. It is why she was often dragging you along everywhere so that your parents knew that the two of you were a team. She tried to bridge that gap, to fix things between you and them, but..."

He trailed off, and Lily felt a lump form in her throat. She hadn't known Jasmine had noticed, let alone cared so much. "But she couldn't fix it," Lily finished for him, her voice barely above a whisper.

Cai shook his head. "No. She couldn't. But she wanted to. She was always thinking about how to help you. We even had a big fight about it once. Towards the end, she mentioned that she was glad that it was her who was suffering and would be gone. She'd hoped that your parents would then love you freely."

Lily gave a bitter smile then. And yet, she could not help but cry. Grabbing a cushion herself, she hugged it close as she put her head on it, "Tell me more."

Cai's voice was soft as he continued, "She wanted to be a teacher when she grew up. So that she would be able to help little kids find their pace instead of studying all the time. She insisted that if a student was good at academics, she would throw them out of the class to explore nature or join some sport."

"I didn't know that." Lily murmured. She'd never even thought of what dreams her sister might have had. And somehow those dreams would be connected to her. Sports. Hadn't she been good at that? It had indeed been Jasmine who had always insisted that even if she was not good at academics, she was good at sports and dance so Lily need not be worried.

Lily felt tears fall from her eyes. She'd always thought that her family had never loved her, that she'd never measured up to those standards and yet, her sister had indeed loved her, accepted her for what she was.

Lily couldn't hold it in any longer. The weight of everything—Jasmine's unspoken love, her parents' favoritism and their barbed words that it was better for her to die instead of Jasmine —came crashing down on her. She started to sob, clutching the cushion against her chest as though it were the only thing holding her together.

Cai tugged the cushion out of her arms and pulled her close. His arms wrapped around her, strong yet tender, as he murmured softly, "It's okay, Lily. Let it out."

She pressed her face against his chest, her fingers clutching the fabric of his shirt as though afraid to let go. Her body shook with the force of her sobs, and she buried herself deeper into his embrace, feeling as if the dam she had built inside her had finally broken. Every tear she had ever held back, every bit of resentment and confusion, all of it poured out now, and she couldn't stop.

"I didn't know. I always thought that Jasmine felt the same way. That I should have been the one to die instead of her."