

Benefits 821

Chapter 821: Turtles

"Were you a turtle or something in your past life? Or do you think you're a turtle now? Because at this rate, the only way you'll ever win her over is if you live to be a hundred!" Dora's tone was dripping with exasperation. "You had an entire month—thirty whole days—alone with her, and what did you do? Build Bird Armies and play tic-tac-toe?"

"Hey!" Cai raised his hands defensively. "We also played air hockey, Monopoly, and plenty of other board games, alright?"

Dora narrowed her eyes at him, clearly unimpressed by the 'helpful' answer. "Cai Frost! Are you in middle school or something? Do you not have any desires? Any lust? What are you? A monk?"

Cai raised an eyebrow, keeping his expression calm. "I think you might want to check with your fiancé before you go throwing around words like lust and desire."

"Let him be jealous!" Dora waved it off with a smirk. "If I didn't know you better, I'd swear there was something wrong with your 'downstairs.'"

Cai sighed dramatically and stared into the camera as if he could escape the conversation. Then, throwing a glance behind her, he called out, "Can you not control her, even a little bit? Look at your fiancé!"

Kael grinned, stepping closer. He leaned down until his face was level with Dora's, clearly enjoying himself. "Oh, since when has anyone been able to control Dora? You overestimate my superpowers, Frost. But seriously, I'm curious too. You've been snowed in together for a month... and yet, no kiss? Nothing?"

Cai rolled his eyes, but his voice stayed level. "Just because I'm not a monk doesn't mean I'm some animal in heat, okay?"

"Yeah, but that spark..." Dora leaned forward, her grin mischievous. "Shouldn't you be feeling uncontrollably attracted to her by now? Where's the fire?"

"I am uncontrollably attracted to her!" Cai groaned. "It's just—I'm thinking long-term here, alright? She's too... scarred."

Kael's teasing grin faded slightly, and he exchanged a quick look with Droa. "Scarred? What do you mean? Something in her past?"

"Not like that." Cai's voice softened. "It's more emotional. She thought I only saw her as a replacement for her sister. She spent so much time convinced I was still pining over her."

"Well..." Dora tilted her head. "Naming that ward after Jasmine must have added to that then."

Cai shook his head. "No, it wasn't that. She didn't even know about the ward. It's her parents... they really did a number on her. Made her believe she was always second best."

Kael crossed his arms, raising an eyebrow at Cai's last comment. "I see. So, what have you been doing this past month, then? Telling her she's the best thing that ever happened to you?" His voice dripped with mock sympathy.

"I've been talking to her, okay?" Cai shot back, defensively. "Not everyone's like you, Kael—jump into bed first and then spend the next years trying to get people to manage your lousy personality."

Kael's expression shifted to one of mock offense as he turned to Dora. "Hey! You think I have a lousy personality?"

Dora raised an eyebrow, giving him a playful smirk. "Oh, absolutely. But I've gotten used to it. Think of it as a little side project."

Kael threw his hands up in mock defeat. "Wow. The betrayal. This is what love looks like, Cai. Watch and learn." He glanced back at Cai, feigning disappointment in Dora. "Honestly, I'm shocked. Here I thought I was the full package."

Dora snorted. "You're the package all right. Just not the one people expect." and nudged Kael with her elbow. "Yeah, and it's my job to make sure no one tries to take this package from me. So, I'm quite pleased."

Kael gave her a pleased glance before turning to Cai on the screen and saying, "At this rate, you'll be married when you're ninety. You need to step it up, Frost! Don't make Dora fly out there and knock some sense into both of you."

Dora chuckled and added, "Yeah, before we have to send a rescue mission to dig you out of your 'deep conversations. I mean I always knew that you had the gift of the gab but this is too much! Next month, the air transport will be viable. What will you do then?"

"Fine fine! I don't know why you have to nag about this. I'll handle things at my pace."

"Okay then Mr Turtle Frost! Handle them at your pace."

"Hey! Turtle is not bad, okay? He won the race, didn't he?" Cai murmured before disconnecting the video call and falling back on the bed and sighing.

Cai lay on the bed, staring at the ceiling as Dora's teasing words echoed in his mind. He wasn't moving at a turtle's pace—he was being careful. Every time he looked at her, he felt that surge of attraction, the undeniable pull. But rushing it would only scare her away. She'd almost slipped through his fingers once, and he couldn't afford to let that happen again. No, this time, he had to be smart and not hurry up. He had to wait.

She'd been through too much—years of feeling second-best, of believing she was just a shadow of her sister. Her scars ran deep, and he didn't want to add to them by moving too quickly or pushing her into something she wasn't ready for. If he rushed now, if he gave in to his own desires without thinking about hers, it would undo everything.

And so, even if he was going to be as slow as a turtle, so be it. In a way, he was glad that nothing had happened between them until now. Anything that could make her doubt later on was a big negative for him.

He turned onto his stomach and frowned. Never would he have believed that to woo the woman he liked, he would need to be so patient and so careful. And yet, that patience was what was going to serve him in the end.

Chapter 822: What?

"What is this thing?" Lily asked, eyeing the large, rugged vehicle in front of her with a mix of curiosity and skepticism.

"This?" He grinned, patting the machine like it was his prized possession. "This is a snowmobile. Perfect for a day like today. Come on, let's take it out for a ride. The weather's absolutely perfect."

"You call this perfect?" Lily scoffed, crossing her arms. "Ugh, if you're feeling invincible or something, go ahead and hop on this death machine."

"Hey! Don't be a chicken!" he teased, flashing her a playful smirk. "Come on, hop on. We can explore a bit, see the sights. What if I go out there, get lost, or worse—run into a bear? Who's gonna scream and scare it away, huh?"

Lily rolled her eyes but couldn't help the small laugh that escaped her. "You're never going to let me live that down, are you?"

"Not a chance," he said, his grin widening. "Unless, of course, you get on this monster with me. Come on, it's going to be fun. Trust me."

She sighed, feeling a mixture of apprehension and excitement twist in her stomach. The way he looked at her, his confidence, and the glint of adventure in his eyes—it was hard to resist. And she did trust him, even though the thought of flying across the snow on this beast of a machine made her heart race with nervous energy.

"Alright," she relented, "but if we get stranded, I'm blaming you."

"Deal," he said, handing her a helmet.

She took it and slipped it on, the cold air biting at her exposed skin as she adjusted the strap beneath her chin. The helmet felt snug, and the visor fogged slightly as she exhaled. Hesitating for just a moment, she climbed onto the snowmobile and settled in behind him, the seat hard and unfamiliar beneath her.

He turned his head slightly to check on her. "You ready?"

Lily nodded, even though her stomach felt like it was full of butterflies. She wrapped her arms around his waist, feeling the warmth of his body through his thick jacket. The engine thrummed beneath them, a low, powerful vibration that seemed to make her heart race faster. The closeness of him, the steady beat of his breath against the cold air—it was comforting, grounding her even as the machine began to rumble.

"Hold on tight," he said, his tone softening but still teasing. "This is going to be fun."

She tightened her grip around him, her fingers flexing nervously. As he revved the engine, the snowmobile shot forward with a sudden jolt, sending a rush of adrenaline surging through her veins. The ground beneath them blurred as they sped across the snow-covered landscape, the wind biting at her cheeks and rushing past her helmet with a sharp, hollow sound.

Lily's hands instinctively tightened around his waist, her body pressing closer to his back as the snowmobile raced forward. The cold air stung her face, slipping into the gaps of her helmet, and she squinted against the sharp breeze. It was exhilarating and terrifying all at once. Her heart pounded in her chest, but she held onto him.

At one point, they hit a small ridge, and the snowmobile lifted off the ground entirely. For a brief moment, they were airborne, the world seeming to hold its breath around them. Her fingers dug into his jacket, and she pressed her cheek against his back as the rush of cold wind made her heart race even faster. When they landed with a solid thud, her laughter broke free, surprising even her.

He turned his head slightly, his voice warm and amused. "Having fun yet?"

She didn't answer him, too lost in the thrill of it all. It was like sitting on a roller coaster but much more fun.

They finally slowed down as they approached a frozen lake. The snowmobile came to a halt near the edge, the engine's growl fading into a low rumble before it quieted altogether. The surface of the lake was like glass, smooth and reflective, stretching out before them in an endless sheet of ice.

He turned to her, pulling off his helmet, his breath visible in the cold air. "What do you think?" he asked, his voice softer now, more intimate in the quiet of the snow-covered world.

Lily smiled, pulling off her own helmet and feeling the chill against her flushed cheeks. "It's... breathtaking."

He smiled as he watched her take in the beauty of the frozen lake, while he took in her beauty. To him, she was the prettiest.

"What are you doing?" Lily asked, her voice still tinged with the lingering excitement of their ride as she watched him open the small compartment under the seat

"Just a little surprise," he said, pulling out a thermos and a small cloth-wrapped bundle. "Thought we could warm up a bit, maybe grab a bite while we're here. Figured you'd appreciate something to eat after all that screaming you did," he teased, winking at her.

She scoffed, though a smile tugged at the corner of her lips. "I wasn't screaming."

"Sure, sure. Tell that to all the bears you woke up from hibernation and my poor ears which are still ringing" he laughed, shaking his head as he spread the cloth on the snow, creating a small makeshift picnic spot. "Come on, sit down. I've got hot chocolate in here, and I even packed some scones."

Lily hesitated for a moment, glancing at the icy ground, but the thought of hot chocolate was too tempting. And as he poured some for her, she could not help but sigh, "You really are a maestro of making hot chocolate. I can't believe you packed all this."

Cai looked at her then, knowing that she was expecting a teasing or gloating response from him, but instead he looked into the hot chocolate before murmuring, "It's our date today. Of course I had to make it special."

Lily choked. She could not help it. Hearing the word 'date', out of the blue and so unexpectedly, she could not help but be shocked. And as she coughed and tried to catch her breath, he patted her back, making her feel even more shocked...

Chapter 823: Make A Move

"Are you sex-deprived?"

Cai nearly choked on his hot chocolate, eyes wide as he stared at Lily in disbelief. Okay, He knew he'd been the one to start the topic after making a cheeky comment about taking her to his bed, since this was their third date and all but he certainly hadn't expected that to be her response. She had asked the question with complete seriousness, her expression somewhere between concern and contemplation. Was she genuinely worried that he was going to die of blue balls or... worse, pounce on her to save himself?

He felt his nose itch as he struggled to catch his breath, turning to make sure she wasn't teasing him. But no, she was dead serious, her eyes fixed on him, genuinely searching for an answer.

His first instinct was to reassure her, to laugh it off and pacify any concerns she might have. But his second, much stronger instinct, was to see how far she'd take this. After all, how could he resist playing along with that?

Adopting the most pitiful expression he could muster, Cai sighed dramatically and murmured, "You understand, don't you? It's been so long in this cold place... all alone. You know the best part for winters is human touch."

Her eyes widened, and he almost lost it at the brief flash of panic that flickered across her face. She gulped audibly, and Cai had to bite the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing. The sheer innocence in her reaction made the whole situation ten times funnier.

When he expected her to awkwardly excuse herself or retreat somewhere but she surprised him. Lily squared her shoulders, bracing herself, and asked, "Well... can't you take care of it yourself?"

Cai had to fight every impulse in his body not to burst out laughing. If he'd had anything in his mouth at that moment, he would've been done for—choking on his own amusement. But he managed to keep his composure, just barely.

Trying his best to look sheepish, he put on the most innocent face he could and said, "Take care of it? How do I do that? I've only ever had other girls do it for me..."

He raised his hand, covering his face in mock embarrassment, his shoulders shaking ever so slightly. The look on her face was priceless—pure confusion mixed with nervousness and... curiosity? He could practically see the gears turning in her head as she processed his words.

The temptation to take it further was overwhelming. He needed to know how she'd respond if he asked her if she could help him out. But before he could push his luck, Lily's sharp eyes caught the slight tremor in his shoulders. Her expression shifted from confusion to realization in an instant.

With an indignant growl, she smacked his arm. "You're pranking me!"

Cai couldn't hold it in any longer and burst out laughing, doubling over as he rubbed his arm where she'd hit him. "I'm sorry! I couldn't help it. Your face was just... too good!" He tried to straighten up, but every time he glanced at her exasperated face, he dissolved into laughter again.

Lily huffed, crossing her arms over her chest, though a hint of a smile tugged at the corners of her lips. "You're the worst, you know that? How can you tease me like this?"

Just as Lily was about to hit him again, he caught her wrist and pulled her close to him, so that she was half leaning on him.

The teasing smile he'd worn just moments ago faded into something more tender. He let go of her wrist and, with the back of his fingers, slowly caressed the side of her face, tracing her jawline until her eyes met his.

"Lily," he murmured, his voice low and serious now, "you really need to stop putting yourself down."

Her brow furrowed, lips parting in confusion. "What do you mean?"

Cai's thumb brushed her cheek, and he leaned in just a little closer, his gaze never leaving hers. "Every time I show you that I'm interested... you don't believe it's real. You always think I'm looking for

something else. At first, you thought I was just... seeing you as a replacement for your sister, like you weren't enough on your own. And now..." He paused, his hand slipping to the back of her neck, gently tilting her face up to him. "Now, you think I'm flirting with you just because I'm sex-deprived?"

Lily blinked, her lips pressing into a thin line as she took in his words. Her frown deepened, though not out of anger—more like confusion and self-doubt. "I-I didn't mean it like that... I just... I don't get why you'd want me like that. I thought maybe you were just... lonely."

Cai sighed softly, shaking his head. "You think I'm that shallow?" His voice was soft, but there was a hint of disappointment that made her heart ache in confusion. Why did she feel bad if he was disappointed.

"No," she whispered, biting her lip, her eyes flickering with uncertainty. "But why me?"

"Lily, stop. Tell me, why not you? You're not 'just you.' You're smart, kind, funny... and you make me feel like myself, like I don't have to pretend to be anyone else when I'm around you. I don't have to be the genius Dr Cai Frost who has all the answers. I can be myself. Heck, I can be a child with you and that is even below my normal self. Why is that so hard for you to see? Do you really think I could have been so comfortable here with any other woman? Or even as interested?"

"I want you, my sweet Lily. And it's not because I'm lonely or desperate, or because of some stupid reason like sex deprivation.

"Cai..." she whispered, her voice shaky.

His thumb stroked her cheek, and he leaned in just enough that their foreheads touched, his breath mingling with hers. "Hush. You don't have to rush to say anything. Just consider this a warning from me... From today onwards, you're going to be officially pursued by me. And if you want to rotify your defenses? All the best."

Chapter 824: You

Lily hugged her pillow tightly, burying her face in its soft fabric as Cai's words echoed endlessly in her mind.

"I care about you."

"I want you."

"You're not 'just you.'"

Each phrase sent a shiver down her spine, making her stomach twist into a knot of nervous excitement. She could still feel the warmth of his hands cupping her face, the intensity in his gaze as he spoke those words to her—words she never expected to hear. They had been so raw, so real, that even now, hours later, her heart wouldn't stop racing.

She rolled onto her back, staring at the ceiling, her mind replaying the conversation over and over like a movie she couldn't turn off. Every little detail came rushing back—the way his voice had softened when he reassured her, the gentle pressure of his thumb tracing her cheek, the way his breath had mingled with hers when their foreheads touched.

And then, of course, there was that moment.

Her face flushed hot as she remembered the awkwardness that followed his 'confession', "Fortify your defenses," he'd said and then....he'd kissed her, taking her lips...

It wasn't rushed or overwhelming, but slow and deliberate, like he was savoring every second. His lips had met hers with a tenderness that caught her off guard, sending a jolt of electricity through her body. She had frozen for a split second, her heart hammering in her chest, before melting into the kiss. The world seemed to blur around them, her senses narrowing down to just him—the warmth of his mouth, the faint taste of mint on his breath, the way his fingers gently tangled in her hair as if he couldn't bear to let her go.

Her body had responded instinctively, her hands gripping the front of his shirt as she leaned into him, completely surrendering to the moment. It was as if nothing else existed but the two of them, wrapped in each other's warmth. And for that brief, breathless stretch of time, she had felt something close to being exhilarated.

But then, as quickly as the kiss had started, it ended. Cai pulled back just enough to look into her eyes, his gaze soft yet intense, like he was searching for something. And whatever he'd found had made him pull back as he placed a small kiss on the corner of her lips, "Let's go back."

All the way back, as she'd held onto his waist, she'd been going through different scenarios in her head. What would she do when they returned. What would he do? Would they pick up the kiss where they'd left off or would Cai pretend that nothing had happened. And how would she react if he really did try to take her to his bed. Ultimately, she'd been too chicken to find out anything and had raced to her room, mumbling an excuse, even before he'd parked the snow mobile.

Lily sighed, shaking herself out of the memory, her heart still racing despite the hours that had passed. What defenses? She thought wryly. I never had any when it came to Cai Frost.

It was true. No matter how much she had tried to guard herself, to keep him at arm's length, her resolve had always melted the moment he looked at her with those eyes, the moment he touched her.

The truth was, it took everything in her not to dissolve into a puddle at his feet whenever he was near. And after tonight... well, there was no denying that she was completely, hopelessly falling for him. But as her heart soared with the possibility of what could be, a familiar voice echoed in the back of her mind—her mother's voice.

Are you really enough? Can you really trust this?

Lily frowned, slamming the door on that thought as quickly as it came. No. Not this time. She had spent far too long doubting herself, questioning whether she deserved to be happy, whether she was worthy of love—real love. And while that nagging voice still whispered in the back of her mind, tonight was different.

It took her a moment that the nagging seriously sounded like her mother and she realized that she'd done it again! She'd gone and let her mother's voice influence her again! Telling her that she was not enough. That she was never going to be enough. And she'd vowed to not let her do that when she'd left home! Just how had she gone stupid after one meeting? Like an alcoholic slipping back into the drinking habit?

She took a deep breath as suddenly everything seemed to be clear and she came to a decision. She wasn't going to let those old insecurities hold her back anymore. Whatever this was between her and Cai, she was going to give it a chance—really give it a chance. And if that meant risking her heart, then so be it. She was tired of doubting herself, tired of being the girl who second-guessed everything good in her life.

Standing up, she shook her head and knew what she needed to do. She was going to seduce him. This was a golden chance. Someone like Cai Frost would definitely be experienced and would not be afraid of taking on a virgin... hopefully. And if he was, well then, she would seduce him so that he didn't need to worry about anything.

As she was about to step out of the room, she caught a look at herself and stopped. She looked a little crazy. Stepping back, she quickly straightened her hair and composed her face, patting her cheeks so that they would not be so red. As she opened the door, she came face to face with Cai who stood there, ready to knock.

He smiled at her, "We have good timing. Come on, dinner is ready..."

Even before he said these words, Lily blurted out, "Sleep with me."

Cai stared at her in confusion and Lily realized that she'd probably mumbled what she wanted to say, so she took a deep breath and said, "Sleep with me!"

Chapter 825: In you

Cai stared at her, brows furrowing in confusion. Lily realized she'd probably mumbled her words, her nerves garbling the clarity she'd hoped for. She took a steadying breath and, before she could overthink, said with quiet resolve, "Sleep with me."

His face betrayed nothing for a long, silent moment, leaving her to wonder if she'd made a terrible mistake. She watched as his expression shifted, the faintest flicker of surprise giving way to something deeper, more controlled. Though a part of him—an undeniable, instinctual part—was ready to respond in full, Cai was caught off-guard by the suddenness of her proposal. He cared about her too much to rush things, and despite every impulse that urged him to close the distance between them, he wanted to be sure she was truly ready.

Seeing his hesitation, Lily's heart sank, a mix of shame and self-doubt bubbling up inside as she wondered maybe he'd only been teasing her and she'd taken it seriously. Her cheeks burned as she shifted to retreat, ready to pretend it hadn't happened, but Cai's hand shot out, catching hers before she could step away.

"Hold on," he said, his voice warm and reassuring. "This is... interesting," he continued, a gentle smirk tugging at his lips. "But I actually came here to ask you out on a proper dinner date. Then, maybe

afterward, we can consider... other plans. You deserve at least a few proper dates, hmm? Though, I doubt anyone would count this as proper. But I did prepare candles..."

Before she could protest or retreat further, he dragged her to the table where he had indeed placed candles. He deftly served a bowl of soup and a side of bread, placing a similar plate before himself.

The dinner, however, was even less like a date when each of them was lost in their own thoughts. Lily's cheeks remained flushed, her mind racing with doubt and confusion. She wasn't entirely sure what she had expected when she asked him to sleep with her—maybe for him to seize the moment, sweep her off her feet, and throw her onto the bed before pouncing on top of her. But instead, here they were, eating soup, Cai looking as relaxed and unbothered as ever. Meanwhile, her stomach felt like it was tied in knots.

"Maybe he doesn't want you like that," a cruel, uncertain voice whispered inside her. "Maybe he's just been teasing you all this time."

Lost in her thoughts, Lily jumped as his voice cut through her reverie. "Stop that, Lily," Cai said gently, but firmly. "I can see the gears turning in your head, and I'll tell you this—we'll talk after dinner. Right now, just focus on eating." His words were soft, but his gaze held hers, steady and calming, and she found herself swallowing back her nervousness and that voice.

After the last bites were taken, she fidgeted, still battling the nerves from her own audacious words. When she finally stood to clear the plates, Cai's hand found hers again.

Without giving her a chance to speak, he led her, more like gently frog-marched her, to the couch. Her heart pounded as he settled himself down and, in one quick motion, tugged her down onto his lap. The sudden shift made her stiffen, but his hands were warm and steady on her hips, grounding her in place before she could insist on taking her own seat on the couch.

"Sit still for a moment, Lily," he murmured, his tone a little dominant, shocking her. "For now, we're just talking."

She bit her lip, eyes flitting nervously around the room before she gave a small shake of her head. "Look, if I made too bold an assumption..."

He quieted her, his hand moving to cup her chin as his eyes burned with something raw, something almost primal. "Hush," he whispered. "You're not allowed to take back your words, not after that." His voice dropped to a low, husky tone that made her shiver. "But before we have this discussion, let me be clear about something."

With a deliberate slowness, he tilted her face so she couldn't look anywhere but at him. "I'm going to know what it feels like to be inside you, Lily," he growled softly. "Right here."

Even as he said the words, his finger moved to the juncture of her thighs and she felt a rush, feeling every nerve ending taut at attention as his fingers traced her through the denim. It was a light touch and yet she felt ablaze by it. She could feel herself clench while his finger stayed there.

"I want you more than you could imagine, but not just for tonight or a few nights. This isn't about some holiday fling." His finger on her chin tightened gently, his gaze darkening as he held her in place before his fingers down there started to trace her again.. "When I have you, I'm taking all of you. I don't think you're prepared for that—not yet. I don't know how your previous partners were but..."

He shifted beneath her, letting her feel the extent of his restraint, the raw desire he held back only for her sake. Her heart was racing, her face flushed, and she whispered, her voice breaking with nerves and anticipation, "I don't... I don't have any previous partners."

His hand froze, his touch stilling over her, even as her words seemed to echo in the charged air between them. She clenched her thighs, trying to suppress her own response, afraid for a moment that he would pull away. But, instead, his eyes softened, a flicker of wonder crossing his face before he resumed his caress, more deliberate now.

"Then I'll have to be even careful," he murmured roughly.

Lily tightened her thighs, capturing his hand from exploring her more, torturing her more as she looked at him with need, "I...I want more..."

"And you will have more... Just slowly. Let go of my hand, Lily..." She shook her head and he smiled, letting go of her chin, "I don't mind the way you are holding tightly. I like it... Your thighs will feel even better wrapped around me, holding me like this."

She blushed and even loosened her lets, letting them fall apart. As she would have run away, he caught her and nuzzled her neck with little laughter, "And I ought to thank the men in Petrovia for being blind enough to overlook you." He ran a hand over her arm, catching her gaze again with that knowing smirk. "They've clearly got no idea what they've been missing."

Cheeks flaming, as she stammered, "It's not like that... I'm not anything special."

"Oh, you have no idea, do you?" he whispered, a hint of amusement mingling with the heat in his eyes. "You're remarkable. And maybe a bit stubborn too, if tonight is any evidence." He leaned closer, their breaths mingling as he studied her face. "So, Lily, what caused this change in attitude? What made you finally want me?"

She hesitated, feeling the weight of his question as her heart pounded louder, filling the silence between them. "I've always wanted you... I just couldn't ignore it anymore," she murmured.

Chapter 826: Knowing Each Other

"So, explain to me again—how exactly is this supposed to help us?" Lily raised an eyebrow at Cai, who seemed far too enthusiastic about his latest idea.

Cai grinned, leaning back casually. "Trust me, it's going to help. We need to build up our teamwork, and what better way than playing a few rounds of online games?"

She gave him a skeptical look. "We're going to improve our teamwork... by gaming?"

"Uh-huh!" he nodded. "We'll play all sorts of games, get some practice working as a team in different settings. You know things like these are what make couples fight the most? Chores and hobbies? So, we will work on these first. Become a team in gaming and hobbies and then, tomorrow, I'll take you to town—you might want to start preparing the bigger house. Now that the weather's clearing, we should be ready for Dora and the others. They could show up any day now, probably without warning. Their version of an 'announcement' will be the helicopter touching down in the backyard."

Lily blinked, feeling the familiar tug of excitement mixed with apprehension. It had been so long. So much had changed. She felt the emotion bubbling up but quickly pushed it down. Cai had told her to trust him, to follow his lead, and she would. But still, she couldn't help asking, "So... how long will you actually be staying here before you have to go back?" She'd been hired for a year so...

Cai paused, glancing sideways at her, considering his words. "I'm not in any rush to leave," he said finally. "I've arranged for the best doctors to head up the hospital. And things are working perfectly well on that end. It is the research part that would need me. Right now, we're going through the first batch of applications for the initial trial and research surgeries—it's a longer process than I'd expected because we have very few volunteers."

He sighed, running a hand through his hair. "I thought funding and infrastructure would be the hardest parts, but finding patients willing to participate? Turns out that's an even bigger challenge. What they fail to realize is if they sign up for a trial surgery they might actually have some chance of living but if they don't, then death is imminent. Sooner or later. But they would rather die later than try anything and die sooner. But it's like they already consider themselves dead."

Lily gave him a sympathetic smile as his frustration softened into a resigned sigh. Before he could dwell on it, she nudged him with a slight grin, waving the gaming console in her hand. "Come on then, Dr. Teamwork. Let's see what you've got."

They jumped into the game, teaming up for a mission, with Cai taking the lead. But Lily, inexperienced as she was, took her role with unexpected intensity and decided that it was best to deal with aggression. Cai laughed as he struggled to keep up with her reckless approach, as she fired all over, while both of them called out strategies and dodging attacks as they moved into the enemy's territory to grab the prize.

Just as they neared the final piece with only a few enemies left, Lily accidentally hit his character, her shot taking him down.

The screen flashed Game Over, and Cai dropped his controller, groaning dramatically. "Lily! I can't believe you killed me," he laughed, leaning over and wrapping her in a playful hug. He buried his face into her neck, pretending to cry. "How could you betray me like that?"

Lily laughed, even as she felt butterflies in her stomach at his closeness. Her hand tightened on the controller to keep herself from hugging him back as she shot back. "I'm just trying to keep you humble! Don't tell me you expected to win every game when I am just starting out."

He lifted his head, grinning down at her, his eyes full of a soft warmth. "Guess we've got to work harder if we want to become a successful team."

Lily rolled her eyes and pushed at his shoulder, ready to challenge him. But instead he did not move an inch, placing his head on her shoulder again, "Or we can try other team building activities..."

His hand moved suggestively over her hips and she felt herself almost melt. Feeling bold, with his gaze not on her, but his breath falling on her neck, she let go of the controller and placed her hands hesitantly on his back.

Her hands began to wander over his back, fingertips tracing a slow, hesitant path across the contours of his muscles. She marveled at the warmth beneath his shirt, the way the fabric shifted under her touch as if it, too, was reacting to her tentative exploration.

As she traced along his spine, her fingers brushed the toned lines of his shoulder blades, feeling the strength there and the way his muscles shifted. She barely noticed her own breathing growing shallow, her pulse picking up in her ears. His hand tightened on her hip, steadying her as she drew circles all over his back, and he groaned softly, the sound sending a thrill through her. Before she could fully process it, he tilted his head, pressing a soft kiss into the crook of her neck. The unexpected warmth of his lips against her skin made her hands shudder, her fingers tightened reflexively, the nails digging into the small of his back.

Cai lifted his head, eyes half-closed, a gleam in them as he looked at her. She met his gaze, caught off guard by the intensity in his eyes, the way they held her so closely, as if she were the only thing he could see.

Without realizing it, her fingers resumed their slow exploration along his back, lingering on each ridge and dip, as if memorizing the feeling of him under her touch.

A breath hitched between them, her fingertips still pressed into his back as his face hovered just inches from hers. "So, is this part of the team-building?" she whispered, unable to help the smile that curved on her lips.

Cai chuckled, his hand moving to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear. "Absolutely," he said, voice low, his gaze never leaving hers. "And I think we're making real progress."

Chapter 827: The Enemies

"These are the latest pictures of Dr. Frost, sir."

The older man looked up from his thick, well-worn file. Slowly closing it with a soft thud, he pushed it aside and reached for the photographs handed to him. His eyes scanned each image of Caius Frost, a slow, satisfied smile creeping across his face. Perfect. He'd finally tracked down the elusive Dr. Caius Frost. And as his gaze lingered on one particular picture, a second thought crossed his mind—a possible vulnerability. Even better.

It was true; blessings often came in pairs.

"Tell me," he murmured, tilting his head toward the man standing nearby, "do you know who she is?"

The man cleared his throat, nodding. "She's listed as the caretaker of the estate where he's staying. Away from... well, away from everyone else." He spoke in a serious tone, but the older man leaned back, his interest piqued.

"Come on now," he chided, a sly glint in his eye. "I can hear it in your voice. You know as well as I do that she's more than just a caretaker. So, is she... taking care of him in other ways, too?"

The man hesitated, but a smirk played on his lips. "Seems that way. Unfortunately, the property is remote—far enough that getting surveillance is a real challenge. These were only captured because they ventured outside. But... I think I've uncovered her identity."

The older man's eyes lit up with intrigue. "Really? Don't keep me in suspense. Tell me who she is."

"Her name is Lily. She's the younger sister of his late girlfriend."

The older man's expression shifted to one of incredulous delight. "Wait—the girlfriend he named that hospital ward after?"

"That's right. The very one." The man's lips twisted in a sardonic smile. "Funny, isn't it? After all that fanfare—the dedication, inviting her parents to the ceremony... Anyone watching would have thought he'd spend his life cherishing her memory. And yet, here he is, cozying up to her little sister instead."

The older man chuckled, a dark amusement flickering in his eyes. "The hypocrisy of it all. People never fail to surprise me. He pretends to be this upright, loyal man and yet, he is nothing but an actor! Very good. Very good. So, tell me you have more..."

"No. I do not have more. Like I said, the place he is in, we will not be able to get any surveillance. But I've already bribed some people in a nearby village to keep an eye out so that whenever they are out, we will have something to go by."

The older man's smile deepened, his fingers drumming lightly on the edge of his desk. "And I can trust you to use this information... effectively?"

The other man nodded, his smirk growing into something sharper and more menacing. "Absolutely. I've already made arrangements. Once I've collected all the choice pieces, we'll make sure his pristine image comes crashing down. The villagers I've enlisted—simple folks, yet they know enough to stay alert when there's cash on the table. And Dr. Caius has a habit of letting his guard down when he thinks he's out of sight." He paused, his tone oozing satisfaction. "A little slip from him, a candid picture here or there, misusing his position and we'll have everything we need to begin."

"Good. But we're not just looking for scandalous rumors," the older man replied, his voice low and steely. "We're going for his reputation, his career, his connections. We'll turn his past into a noose and hang his 'legacy' with it."

The man shifted slightly, leaning forward with a spark of eagerness in his eyes. "I've already started with a few discreet contacts. The parents of that ex-girlfriend of his? They were surprisingly open, eager even, to tell me their side of the story. They adored him once, of course. But I can already sense that they are not happy about this new development—their bitterness is quite visible. If I guide them carefully, they'll give us precisely the ammunition we need to set things off."

A slow, calculating smile spread across the older man's face as he considered the strategy. "And you'll make sure every word reaches the right ears, yes? Press contacts, acquaintances... all of them need to be fed just the right details."

The man grinned. "That's all in motion. But we won't start with the press, not right away. Instead, we'll let whispers spread. Small, insinuating whispers that begin in the very circles he's closest to. His colleagues, old friends, even a few key donors to his hospital... I've already started that since he has taken a long vacation and is nowhere around to defend himself. A few of the nurses have sent 'anonymous' complaints about his harassment. And there is this patient..."

The older man nodded approvingly, a gleam of satisfaction lighting up his otherwise cold eyes. "Good. I want him to feel it, to feel it all slipping away—bit by bit. Let him wonder, let him scramble. But we keep him in the dark just long enough that he can't piece together where the attacks are coming from. By the time he figures it out, he'll be powerless to stop it."

"He'll have nowhere to run, nowhere to hide. Just like he did to you."

A dark look passed over the older man's face as he leaned back, gripping the armrests of his chair with white-knuckled intensity. "Exactly. Caius Frost stripped everything from me. And I intend to watch him unravel, step by step, until there's nothing left of that carefully constructed life of his but ashes."

The man let a short, tense silence settle before he spoke. "I'll be handling all our contacts discreetly. The fewer people who know, the better. I've made sure of it. Don't worry. His return might not be so easy."

"Good. We strike when he's most comfortable—when he thinks he's safe and untouchable," the older man replied, his voice deadly calm. "Start making the calls. And soon, very soon, I'll get my revenge."

Chapter 828: Caius Frost

"Are you sure these aren't just some pranks?" Cai asked Rafe, his brows furrowed as he stared intently at the man through the screen.

Rafe shook his head, his expression serious. "These do not sound like pranks, Cai. They feel more like whispers—rumors that have a life of their own. I'm already investigating the situation, but whatever the source is, it's being kept under wraps, hidden from view."

"But since you don't know the truth, it could very well be about someone else entirely," Cai replied, doubtful that someone would want to run a smear campaign against him.

Rafe's head shook again, firmer this time. "That's not what has reached me. You know better than to ignore the signs, Cai. Don't bury your head in the sand. You need to return as soon as possible. The longer you stay away, the more emboldened those who are trying to spread rumors about you will become. Are you absolutely certain you don't have any enemies out there?"

Cai shrugged, lifting a hand to point at his own face with a grin. "Look at me. Do I look like someone who could ever have enemies?"

Rafe arched an eyebrow, considering the question carefully. "From your face, you might appear harmless. But from your deeds, I would wager that you have enemies spread all over the globe. You may not see them, but they could be lurking in the shadows, waiting for the perfect moment to strike."

"I don't allow shadows around me Rafe. Relax. Even if it is someone trying to do something, I will handle it when the time comes. For now, thank you my friend for looking into the matter. But I have something even more important to do."

"Something more important? Like what? Sleeping and eating? What can you be doing in a remote guest house all alone? Having parties with the bears?"

Instead of giving him a straight answer, Cai picked up the phone and walked towards the door of the room. As he'd guessed, Lily was there, with her back to him, setting the table outside. He turned the camera, "This is what I am working on. My future."

Rafe's eyes widened. How the hell had this man found a woman in those wild boonies?

Before he could say something, Cai turned the camera back to the front one and raised an eyebrow, "Now you know why I cannot come back. I need to work on getting a girlfriend."

"How did you? What do you mean a girlfriend..."

Cai grinned and shrugged, "I'll explain when I get back. For now, though, I don't intend to come back anytime soon, especially for some rumors."

Rafe narrowed his eyes and nodded, "Okay. But just be careful and let me know if you can think of any enemy who might want to hurt you. I'll keep an eye out for you and any rumors arising. Stay alert and try to hurry back."

Once the phone had disconnected, Cai had already pushed aside the thoughts and suspicions that Rafe had shared and was determinedly walking towards the one person who was always on his mind.

Crossing the room, he wrapped his arms around her from behind, pulling her close. "What smells so good?" he murmured against her shoulder.

Lily jumped slightly, a nervous laugh escaping her lips even as she was caught in the unexpected embrace. His hand against her stomach making her feel butterflies "Cai! You scared me! I was just prepping for dinner. Its the casserole that smells good."

'Uh huh. I don't think so. I think it is you that smells so good, absolutely delightful enough to eat."

"Glib tongued male is what you are! How can you say something so cheesy?"

Cai stepped back as she moved to place the dish in the oven and grinned," Because you like cheesy."

As she straightened, he caught her hand and pulled her into his arms, taking her lips in a kiss. He couldn't get enough of their kisses. He would kiss her all day if she allowed. And then she responded to his kiss almost instantly, letting his tongue explore her while she kissed him back. He groaned. How did this girl become an expert at kissing within a day?

He had no idea for how long they kissed but as he moved back, breaking the kiss to look into her eyes, he could not help but sighing," Lily... I want you."

"I want you too, Cai." She whispered back and he caught her lips in a kiss again, nipping at her lips slightly.

Soon, he broke the kiss and with his eyes on hers, slowly started to unbutton the sweater she wore, his finger tracing the little bit of skin that was exposed with every button until he'd pushed it off his shoulders. She felt her breath catch and mimicking him, tried to get rid of his sweater. He stepped back for a minute, and pulled the sweater over his head and throwing it aside.

The first touch of her hands on his shoulders was like fire and he stilled for a moment, taking in the dual sensations of seeing her beautiful self while her hands explored him, her expression one of wonder.

Her nails grazed slightly over his nipples and he pulled in a sharp breath, forcing himself to stay still and let her hands explore.

His reaction seemed to make her bolder and her fingers on his body tightened as she stepped closer to him, kissing his shoulder lightly.

And then, as her hands continued to simply trace his flesh, she looked into his eyes and told him, "I don't know what to do next..."

His breath caught at the mix of her innocence and need. "Kiss me, Lily. Trace the path of your hands with your lips. Let me feel your touch."

She did exactly that, leaning forward and kissing his shoulder again, before moving softly, letting herself feel and explore him, taste him. And when her tongue lapped at his nipple and he groaned, she felt a rush of pleasure she had not expected...

Chapter 829: Fun In That

"We came to see you."

Lily halted in her tracks, staring at her parents as if they were specters from another world. Almost six months had passed since she'd last seen them—six months that had changed her in ways they couldn't possibly understand. Yet here they were, looking exactly the same, as if no time had passed for them. Her hands clenched reflexively as she took them in, trying to reconcile their sudden appearance with the stable, happy life she'd been building with Cai.

Her and Cai spent the last few months together, acknowledging each other's growing importance in their lives and even though Cai had gone back to Petrovia, she'd been happy and stable.

The larger mansion had already been prepared for any guests that Princess Isidora might expect and she'd also started to build a rapport with the people in town, getting to know them and whom to contact for what work. And so, she was shocked when she'd received a message from the inn keeper in town telling her that someone had come to stay with them and asked for her.

The larger mansion had already been prepared in advance for any guests Princess Isidora might be expecting, and Lily had spent weeks building rapport with the locals, getting to know their faces, their customs, and even whom to contact for different types of work. She was beginning to feel like she truly belonged here. So, when she received a message from the town innkeeper saying someone had asked for her, she hadn't thought twice about following up. Foolishly, she'd assumed it might be some unexpected surprise orchestrated by the Frost family. After all, Cai had told her about the tricks and surprises his family sometimes sprang on newcomers to the family.

But now, seeing her parents here, she could not help but wonder if they'd somehow discovered her relationship with Cai and were here to create a scene and scold her like last time. She straightened. The last time had been unexpected. Like hell she was going to take any abuse from them again! And abuse was that was actually, she knew and acknowledged it now.

"Why are you here?" she finally managed, the question slipping out before she could temper the edge in her voice.

Her mother glanced around the modest but well-kept inn, her expression unreadable. Only the innkeeper, a discreet and kindly woman, occupied the space with them, but still, her mother seemed wary of speaking openly. "I think we should talk privately," she replied, her voice soft yet firm. "We've known for a while that you were here, but it took time to find you. We waited for you, Lily."

Lily raised an eyebrow, unimpressed by her mother's careful words. "Thank you for your patience, but as I recall, you already said everything you wanted to the last time we met. I don't think there's anything left for us to discuss."

Her father's voice cut in, low and familiar in its gentleness. "Lily... we came to apologize. Please, can we speak in private? Give us a chance to explain."

The quiet earnestness in his tone caught her off guard, making her pause. If her mother had been the one asking, she'd have brushed it off without hesitation. But her father—his voice held something different, something she hadn't expected, and it made her falter.

And so she nodded, somehow agreeing when she'd always imagined turning them away the next time they came across each other. Finally, they moved to a quiet corner of the inn, where a fragile sense of privacy existed. Lily settled into a chair across from her parents, folding her arms tightly, defensively, as

her father lowered himself into the seat across from her. Her mother sat beside him but remained stiff, her gaze directed toward the window.

Her father sighed as he sent his wife a glance and said, "First, I think I need to apologize for what passed between us last time. It was... too much."

Lily gave her father a nod of acknowledgement, not fake accepting his apology and not blaming him... for now.

"When we saw you with Cai before... we didn't know what to make of it," he admitted, a hint of regret softening his voice. "It felt like a shock to the system. I think a part of us assumed that... well, that Cai would always be Jasmine's. That he'd always see her as his one love." He rubbed his forehead, searching for the right words. "And, Lily... we somehow believed you would see him only as your brother-in-law, nothing more. Added to that, he'd been the one to invite us to Petrovia, for inaugurating the place that he'd named after her... We did not handle that well. We apologize for that."

Once again, Lily kept silence even though she wanted to scoff at everything. They had not handled anything well. Not just that one instance! But she continued to stare at them and realized that even now, her parents were uncomfortable looking at her. She felt a bitter smile rise to her lips. They still looked at her and only saw their older daughter's death and not the younger daughter's life.

"But the truth is, while we were caught up in our own grief, we failed to see what was right in front of us," her father continued. "The world moved forward, and we... we didn't. Losing Jasmine, it felt like losing everything. And instead of supporting you, we..." He trailed off, the words catching as he looked down, his voice barely above a whisper. "We made you pay for our pain."

There was a long pause, and Lily felt her throat tighten. She wanted to hold onto her anger, to keep the walls up, but her father's words were genuine, and they tugged at her resolve to keep the distance. This was the first time he'd talked about the pain and about her.

In that moment, all she wanted to do was race to him and hug him, tell him that he could acknowledge the loss of his daughter and mourn her, but she held back. Because the woman at his side was still as stiff as a board.

Finally, she looked over at her mother, who still wouldn't meet her gaze. Her face was unreadable, and her fingers fidgeted in her lap, her knuckles pale from the grip.

Lily sighed, her voice quiet but pointed. "And... does she feel the same way?"

Her mother's eyes flicked toward her but didn't quite meet her gaze. Her lips pressed tightly together, as if the words she wanted to say were caught somewhere between pride and shame.

Her father glanced at her mother, then turned back to Lily. "She's working through things in her own way. It's... not easy. You know how she can be but this time, we are determined. We really don't want to lose out our younger daughter as well, Lily. We've already lost so much. The last few years...we should have cherished your growing up, but instead we made the biggest mistakes of our lives. Lily... can you... come live with us?"

Lily's breath caught in her throat. Go back with them? After everything they'd put her through? Her first instinct was to refuse, to tell them she had no interest in returning to their lives, no matter how much they claimed to have changed.

But she stopped herself, taking a long, steady breath. Her father's eyes were filled with quiet hope, his regret clear, and her mother—well, her mother was still guarded and stiff, but even she seemed weighed down by something unspoken.

"I... I can't leave here," Lily said, finally finding her voice. "I've already committed to work here. Princess Isidora trusted me, and I have responsibilities. I can't just walk away from that."

A flicker of disappointment crossed her father's face, but he nodded in acceptance. "Of course, Lily. Take all the time you need. We're not asking for anything more than a chance to prove ourselves. And to hopefully catch up with the past."

He reached across the table, his hand hovering, but Lily didn't meet it. Instead, she folded her arms, protecting herself from the weight of his hopeful gesture.

"Would you join us for lunch?" he asked slowly, as if trying not to startle her.

She shook her head. "No, I... I have some things I need to finish up today. But we can... schedule something soon." Her voice sounded distant, even to herself, but her emotions were a tangled mess she couldn't sort through here and now. She needed air, space to think.

Without waiting for more, she stood up, barely looking back as she left the inn. Outside, she drew in a sharp breath, feeling the coolness of the breeze against her skin, steadying her frayed nerves. She felt unsteady and raw, with emotions stirring she hadn't prepared for. Her parents' sudden reappearance had turned her world upside down, and she didn't know what to make of it yet.

Inside, as the door swung shut, Lily's mother turned to her father, her expression hardening. "Why didn't you ask her about her illicit affair with Caius Frost? You know that reporter wasn't lying—"

Her father cut her off with a weary sigh. "Because, for once, I wanted to see her without judgment, without driving her away. Gina, I know you are still not ready to let go. But you promised me this time. Remember that promise! I am not willing to lose another daughter just because you are not willing to get over your grief. If you have come here with any other intention than to mend the broken bridges then return now. I will not give you a chance to hurt Lily again."

Chapter 830: Unbelievable

What kind of smear campaign is this?" Cai muttered, his eyes narrowing as he scrolled through the reports and links that had been forwarded countless times on social media. He'd always had a distaste for these platforms, even though his dad knew how to navigate them. People seemed to forward anything without a second thought, never caring if it was true. And now, an old photo of him leaving a club with three different women had resurfaced, shared alongside a supposed "list" of all the women he'd been involved with. This was absurd! It wasn't like he was married or had ever claimed he was living some saintly life.

What really hit a nerve, though, was how his own words about Jasmine—words he'd spoken from the heart—had been twisted into some tasteless meme. The quotes made him sound like a hypocrite, pretending to be honorable while living like a player. All he'd ever said was that "Jasmine will always hold a part of my heart" and that "her death impacted me deeply." He'd spoken honestly about how losing her had left scars on him and had even shared that it was "one of the reasons I chose this career path." One of the reasons dam* it! He had also mentioned Erasmi Frost. But they were not talking about that, were they and had conveniently forgotten him.

"While your expression of anger is fascinating, I have to admit—I'm curious about something," Rafe remarked, his gaze steady as he observed Cai. The hint of amusement playing on his face was unmistakable, and Cai couldn't help but bristle at it.

"What?" Cai shot back, his irritation clear. "Are you asking who's targeting me? Who I supposedly offended this time?"

Rafe chuckled, shaking his head. "Nope. I'm sure we'll figure that out soon enough. If you'd known exactly who was after you, you wouldn't be here brooding—you'd already be on your way to settle things. What I'm actually curious about is this 'list'." Rafe leaned in, his eyes gleaming with mischief. "Have you really slept with that many women, Cai?"

Cai snorted, rolling his eyes. Typical. No wonder Rafe and Dora got along so well—they both had a talent for fixating on all the wrong details. Maybe being next in line for a crown did something to a person's head. "Not even close," he replied dryly. "A few names on that list, sure, but most of those women are just acquaintances or friends. Nothing like what they're suggesting."

Rafe sighed in mock disappointment, shaking his head slowly. "How utterly underwhelming. If only it were true; then at least all this scandal might be worth the hype."

Cai couldn't help but chuckle at that, but his expression turned serious. "If they wanted something truly sensational, they should have questioned the women themselves."

Rafe raised a skeptical eyebrow, sensing there was more behind that comment. "Oh? And what's that supposed to mean?"

Cai gave him a pointed look before a smirk tugged at his lips. "Let's just say I like things messy in the bedroom, Rafe. I have... certain kinks."

Rafe visibly winced, holding up a hand. "Too much information, Cai. Really. Take your frustration out on anyone but me."

Cai shrugged nonchalantly. "Hey, you asked. And you're the one bringing me this lovely bit of news."

Rafe rolled his eyes but then turned serious. "Well, here's the real issue—they're not after the truth. They're trying to create a narrative for you. Specifically, that you're untrustworthy and abuse your

power. Given that you're still in your twenties, some factions might be more than willing to buy into that image."

Cai nodded, his gaze narrowing. "So, they're trying to undermine my position—and by extension, yours—by using me as a pawn in their smear campaign."

Rafe's expression grew graver as he nodded. "Exactly. It's why I wanted to speak to you in person. Beyond these enlightening headlines, there are also rumors circulating about the nurses involved in your recent charity work. Those stories have been picked up as well, and I expect they'll go viral any day now. We'll need to act fast."

Rafe studied Cai's expression as the man sat quietly, thinking and noted the tightness around his eyes and the flicker of genuine worry there. Cai wasn't usually one to care so deeply about public opinion, which only made Rafe more curious. He leaned back suddenly, his gaze sharpening.

"I'mm be dam*ned! You're seeing someone seriously, aren't you?" Rafe asked suddenly, cutting straight to the point. Cai's eyes shifted, caught off guard, and Rafe raised an eyebrow knowingly. "That's why you're this worried. You wouldn't be sweating over rumors so much otherwise."

Cai's lips parted, as though he was about to respond, but Rafe held up a hand, piecing things together. "Hold on. Isis practically insisted on this vacation, and she was oddly enthusiastic about you going—and you were with a woman the last time we spoke..." He snapped his fingers as it clicked. "Isis set you up! She knows, doesn't she? That's why she pushed for you to go there in the first place."

Cai sighed, running a hand through his hair as he finally confessed, "Yeah, alright. I am seeing someone, Rafe. And I really like her—a lot. More than I have anyone in a long time." He paused, his expression softening as he spoke, his gaze drifting as though he could see her right there. "It's taken a long time to break through her walls, to really get close to her. And now, with these rumors and all the venom people are spewing online, it's only a matter of time before it hits her too. I know it'll hurt her, and I don't want that. She deserves better."

Rafe's expression softened, but he kept his tone pragmatic. "If this girl holds your interest, then she must be sharp. And from what I know of you, she's probably tough enough to withstand a few rumors, especially with you at her side. Relationships like this don't stay easy, Cai. If she's worth it, she'll be able to handle the scrutiny. And as long as you're with her, she's not going through it alone."

Cai's eyes darkened, a shadow passing over his face as he shook his head. "If only it were that simple," he murmured, his voice thick with the weight of something unspoken.

Rafe's brow furrowed. "What do you mean? What's so complicated about it? You're one of the few people who's allowed to live a little—this kind of drama will pass."

Cai met Rafe's gaze, the reluctance and anxiety clear in his eyes. Finally, after a deep breath, he admitted, "The girl I'm seeing... she's Jasmine's younger sister."

Rafe's mouth dropped open slightly, the realization hitting him like a cold splash of water. "Jasmine's sister?" he repeated, the shock evident in his tone. "As in the Jasmine—the one you publicly mourned, the one whose loss changed everything for you? And now... her younger sister?"

Here's an improved and expanded version of Cai's reflection, followed by a continuation of the scene:

"Yes," Cai replied, his voice barely above a whisper, the weight of his words hanging heavily in the air. "It's been difficult for her too. Jasmine's death affected her deeply, just like it did for me. She's been grieving in her own way, carrying her own scars. And..." His voice trailed off as he grappled with the best way to articulate the complexity of the situation.

Finally, he sighed, gathering his thoughts. "Here's the thing. Lily has been compared to Jasmine her entire life, especially by her parents. They've held her up against Jasmine's memory like a constant reminder of what they lost, and it's been suffocating for her. She's suffered in ways that I can't even begin to imagine. When I initially asked her out, she ran away. She thought that I was doing it simply because she looked like Jasmine—like I wanted to use her as some sort of replacement for Jasmine, rather than recognizing her as her own person. And now, with these articles circulating... I'm terrified that they'll only add to that narrative."

Rafe's expression shifted to one of understanding, his brow furrowing as he absorbed Cai's words. "That's brutal," he acknowledged quietly. "No one should ever have to live in someone else's shadow, especially not a sibling. It sounds like she's been through enough already." Even as he said it, he was reminded of what his own brother had faced because of him and winced, feeling like a hypocrite himself.

But he understood. "She's her own person, with her own story... and stepping out with you would only remind people of Jasmine and open her to comparisons."

"Exactly," Cai said, the weight in his tone unmistakable. "It would be like reopening old wounds for her. And I can handle people saying whatever they want about me. But to put her through that? Especially after all she's already been through? I just... I can't let that happen."

Rafe looked at Cai carefully then. Things had just taken an even worse turn than even he had imagined. This was a scenario that had never occurred to him. He hesitated but then made the suggestion, "Listen, Cai. If this is real, and if you both care about each other, then there is way you can protect her..."

Cai looked up at him, "Really? How?"

"By distancing yourself from her- physically and emotionally. At least until all this tides over and restores to normal..."