

## Benefits 831

### Chapter 831: Suspicion

"Have you spoken to Caius in these past few days?"

Lily looked up from the noodles she was slowly twirling around her fork, her father's unexpected question catching her off guard. They'd been sharing lunch together for the past few days, a somewhat new routine, but their conversations had barely gone beyond polite small talk and weather updates. And now he wanted to talk about Caius? She wasn't entirely sure how much he knew of her current relationship with Caius, or what his opinions about it were, but she did know one thing—she wasn't about to let his thoughts sway her one way or another.

"Not spoken to," she replied, keeping her tone neutral. She didn't feel any need to clarify that she and Caius had actually been texting each other almost constantly. That was personal. If they wanted to know more, they'd have to ask directly. Just because she'd chosen to have a few meals with them didn't mean she was ready to forgive, forget, or pretend the past didn't exist.

Her mother snorted at her answer, but Lily let it slide, keeping her expression impassive. It amazed her how much she had internalized Caius's own philosophy. He'd once told her that while things could certainly bother him, he tried not to let his emotions be dictated by others' actions. He focused on his own peace of mind, rather than letting other people pull him off balance.

In the past, sitting down to a meal with her parents would have been unthinkable. The constant tension, her father's tiptoeing around her mother's icy stares, and her mother's disapproving glances across the table would've grated on her nerves within minutes. In truth, those dynamics still got under her skin, but she found it easier now to remind herself that however they felt—that was their issue, not hers.

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Like her, her father ignored her mother's derisive snort, his gaze remaining steady on her, which made her wonder what exactly he was trying to understand. Did he think he needed to lecture her about dating a guy? If so, she would have to tell him he was about ten years too late for that. But for now, she answered carefully, her tone as neutral as she could keep it. "Close enough."

An uneasy silence settled over the table, lasting a few minutes as her father seemed to be weighing how to proceed. She could sense his hesitation, see it in the way his fingers fidgeted with the chopsticks on his plate.

"Have you... stayed in touch with him... since then?" he finally asked, his voice quieter now. She nearly snorted. It was tempting to pretend she didn't understand the question at all, make him clarify but instead, she spared him the discomfort.

"If you mean since Jasmine's death? No," she replied plainly. "He'd cut off all of us. And after I left you both, I wasn't exactly going to go looking for him." She shrugged. "I ran into him a few months ago. It was a coincidence."

Her mother snorted again, louder this time, while her father only nodded, quietly digesting her words as he turned his attention back to his noodles, leaving them to eat in silence once more.

The reprieve lasted all of three minutes.

"You're dating him." Her mother's voice cut through the quiet with an accusing edge, a challenge as clear as day.

Lily shrugged, not taking the bait. "Yes."

Her mother's reaction was immediate, her face twisting with a mix of anger and disbelief. "How can you be so shameless?" Her voice rose, the accusation hanging heavily in the air. "On the one hand, you refuse to even acknowledge your own parents over what you call our 'apparent' neglect. But when it comes to Cai, you don't seem to have any problem using Jasmine to your advantage."

Lily felt her jaw tighten, her patience wearing thin over the repeated comparison. Her response came out sharper than she intended, but she held her ground. "I'm not Jasmine to him, Mother. He doesn't see me that way."

Her mother scoffed; the disbelief apparent. "Oh? And how exactly do you know that?"

Lily paused, setting her fork down deliberately, her gaze steady as she looked directly at her mother. Pushing her plate away slightly, she took a calming breath before responding.

"Because he knows the difference between me and her. He understands it, which is more than I can say for some people." She gestured at the plate in front of her. "Jasmine used to love thin noodles like these," she continued, her voice steady but edged with resentment. "I always hated them. But this is all you've been ordering since I started joining you both for lunch. Not once have you thought to ask what I might actually like."

The silence that followed was thick, uncomfortable. Her father looked down at his plate, his fingers twitching slightly as he gathered his thoughts. Finally, he cleared his throat and looked up at her, a tired kind of regret etched across his face.

"We were... wrong, Lily," he began slowly, his voice low, almost hesitant. "I know it may not be easy to believe, but I didn't come here with any intention other than to reconcile, to make things right between us." He paused, his gaze softening as he took in her expression. "I'm sorry if we hurt you by making assumptions. I know we've made mistakes, and I want you to feel free to point them out if we mess up again." His voice grew thicker. "I didn't realize until now that we hadn't just lost Jasmine... we lost both our daughters."

Lily felt a pang of something she hadn't expected to feel: sympathy. Her father's words, though a bit clumsy, struck a chord. She'd lost her family over Jasmine's death too and that was the truth. She gave a small nod, feeling oddly touched. "Okay," she murmured, her voice softening. "I'll try to do that."

But her mother, who had been watching them with a steely expression, gave a cold, derisive laugh that shattered the fragile understanding forming between them.

"If you think he sees you as anything more than a way to pass the time and get over the past, you're only fooling yourself," her mother said flatly. "And the truth will prove itself soon enough! He hasn't really called you since he left has he? I can see from your face that you think it's okay because you are messaging and all, but soon, those would dwindle too and then you will know! You were nothing but a holiday fling to him. Convenient."

#### Chapter 832: Lost

Lily was deep in thought as she made her way back to the sprawling mansion to continue her work. Preparing each room to be ready for guests at a moment's notice might seem straightforward, especially with the place so empty, but in reality, it was a time-consuming process. Each unused room had to be

carefully inspected – checking the water flow, testing the heaters, changing out the bed linens, and even fixing creaky floorboards. After all they could not have guests worrying about resident ghosts.

There was an endless list of small tasks that kept her hands busy and her mind grounded. Normally, managing and directing this routine work brought her a sense of calm, a comforting illusion of control over her world.

But today, her usual calm had been shattered, slipping away as if washed down a drain. She couldn't shake the sting of her recent 'argument' with her mother. The thing about hurtful words, she mused as she walked down the hallway, was that they rarely left a lasting mark when spoken by strangers. But when they came from family, they seemed to strike with ruthless precision. Her mother, of all people, knew exactly which buttons to press, how to spark pain in places that no one else could reach.

Shaking her head, Lily allowed herself a faint smile of relief. At least she had stood her ground, told her mother point-blank that she wouldn't tolerate it anymore. Her father hadn't been thrilled with her decision to forgo any more shared meals with her mother, but he'd seemed to understand. Tomorrow, at least, she'd be spared the tense, painful lunches in town that left her more worn out than any amount of physical labor ever could.

But even so, she could not help but stare down at the phone in her hand, almost tempted to call Cai and listen to his soothing voice. But she shook herself. That would almost be like needing to affirm that her mother's words were wrong. It was okay to keep texting. He was a busy man. Even when here, he'd never really been vacationing, his mornings dedicated to discussions about patients that his team was looking for. She would not let her mother let anymore insecurities in her mind. She and Cai had formed a strong bond and that is how it was going to be.

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Cai looked down at his phone, or rather the picture on it. It was him and her, sitting together in the snow with their little Bird Army. He smiled at the memory before sighing and falling back onto his bed. as he thought back to Rafe's suggestion, to distancing himself from her- physically and emotionally.

The idea of it was as acceptable to Cai as chowing down on a cold bowl of vomit. Even just the thought of pulling away from her made his stomach churn. He had no intention of distancing himself. Not now, not ever. She was... well, she was everything to him.

But he couldn't deny that Rafe might have a point. Outside, there were already whispers, stories swirling as the press gathered, ready to pounce on any opportunity to dig their claws into his life. Being with her at a time like this would only make things harder for her, open her up to the same brutal scrutiny that he was dealing with. The thought made his fists clench. She didn't deserve to be dragged through the mud just for being close to him.

As he continued to gaze at his phone, as if connected by an invisible thread, her name suddenly flashed on the screen. For a fleeting moment, he contemplated whether he should ignore the call. But then he shrugged it off; unless those pesky reporters were tapping his phone, there was no harm in chatting with her. Besides, he could always drop a hint or two about what was happening, just to keep her in the loop.

But while he was lost in thought, the call had already disconnected. With a slight frown, he rolled over and quickly dialed her number again, his impatience growing. When she didn't answer, he almost groaned in frustration. But now that he had made up his mind to talk to her, there was no stopping him. He dialed once more, and a grin spread across his face when he finally heard her breathless voice.

"Hello?" she said, a hint of surprise lacing her tone.

"Hey there! Wow, you sound out of breath," Cai teased, leaning back against his pillows. "Don't tell me you were up to something naughty. Is that why it took you so long to answer? Hmm?"

Lily let out a laugh, the sound melodic and bright, even as she tried to catch her breath. "What is it with you and these dirty thoughts? I dropped my phone into the snow from the first floor, okay? I had to race all the way down to get it!"

Cai rolled his eyes playfully. "That's so boring! I like my version better. Picture this: you were in bed, calling my phone, but couldn't get through. So you decided to think of me to pleasure yourself. And then, of course, when I called you back, you chickened out and wondered if you should answer my call. And then you did so that I could help you get off..."

Lily's breath caught in her throat as she heard his voice and thanked the heavens that she was alone! Cai Frost had no filter at all!

"Cai! We don't talk for a few days and the first thing you talk about is..."

But Cai cut her off, "I miss you, Lily! I want to be with you, inside you, feeling you under me..."

Lily laughed and casually walked back inside, "Cai, will you be serious? How are you doing? How is work?"

Cai sighed, "Work is okay. I am not. I miss you Lily. I wish I could simply come back there and continue to live with you."

Chapter 833: Break up

"I need to go. We should forget everything that happened between us. Needless to say, it was a big mistake."

\*utter silence following this announcement\*

"What? You better be kidding!" Cai exclaimed, his voice tinged with disbelief as he recovered his voice a few heartstopping seconds later. Just a few moments later, he then noticed Lily falling back in laughter, unable to contain herself.

"You should have seen your face!" she teased, her eyes sparkling with mischief.

"Because it wasn't funny! I was genuinely scared that you were going to slip into some state of denial or something! I was even wondering if I could turn back time and avoid telling you anything at all or if I needed to catch a plane and get there on the next flight," Cai shot back, frustration creeping into his tone, even as he felt relief at her laughter. She was just kidding, he reminded himself, tempted to pat himself to calm his heart.

Lily laughed harder, shaking her head in amusement. "Okay, okay! I'm sorry! It's just that I've rarely seen such an intense expression on your face regarding anything other than work. You had the same look you get when you're buried under all those patient reports!"

Lily laughed and shook her head, "Okay okay! I am sorry! It's just I've rarely seen such an intense expression on your face regarding anything other than work. You had the same look you have when you are studying all those patient reports."

Cai rolled his eyes, a hint of a smile breaking through his irritation. "Of course. Because those reports are a matter of life and death, Lily. And so is this."

Her laughter faded, and she straightened up, taken aback by his serious tone. Sometimes, he said the most amazing things, completely shocking her with his insights. The gravity in his voice reminded her that beneath his playful demeanor lay a man who cared deeply about the people around him. She could see it in his eyes—an earnestness that made her heart flutter, even amidst the lighthearted banter that they always shared.

Before she could say anything more, he spoke up, "Promise me, Lily. That you won't go back to denial and ignoring me. If everything gets too much to bear, just come to me, okay?"

For a fleeting moment, Lily realized that she'd probably genuinely hurt him with the way she had let him go last time. That was... unexpected.

"I won't be foolish, Cai. We are in a relationship that is important to both of us, so I am not going to give it up, easily."

Cai smiled then, reassured as he returned to the original topic- ranting about the rumors spreading about him on social media.

"I swear, with the man-whore they are making me out to be, they might even claim that I went away to hide my pregnancy or something."

Lily giggled at this, and Cai couldn't help but smile at her reaction, the warmth in his chest returning at the sound. It had been the right decision to make to tell her everything.

"Seriously, though! One minute, I'm just a doctor trying to do my job, and the next, I'm the subject of every gossip blog in the city! They've got me linked to every single woman I've ever spoken to," he lamented, shaking his head in disbelief. "It's like they think I'm some kind of playboy just because I'm single. I mean, come on! It's not like I'm out there flaunting it. I'm just... living my life!"

Lily leaned back, her amusement turning to curiosity. "Oh please, you are hardly 'some' doctor. In case you've forgotten, you are also part of the richest family in the world, you are the youngest neurosurgeon with a list of achievements under your belt. And you are charming and flirtatious as hell! Of course they think you are a play boy! Added to that, you cannot deny the claim, because you are...well experienced!"

Cai's expression changed at her words and he leaned closer to the screen, "Hmm. I don't think I'm quite experienced. I mean, if you think it is my experience that brings you to all those highs, then that's just my desire for you baby."

Lily rubbed her thighs together as she felt his voice hit all the right spots. See. Even thousands and thousands of metres away, he could get that reaction from her by a mere inflection of his voice! He had no right to complain about people thinking of him as a playboy when he was all sex on a stick!

She thanked the fates that he was not right here or he might have wanted to do things to her... and shook his head, "Okay, come on. You said so yourself that some of these women mentioned, you've already had a relationship with. So, they've just added a bit of the seasoning to it."

"I don't have a problem with the seasoning babe. It is the ultimate lies.. I have never had a relationship with a single person related to my profession. Not even as a one-night stand."

"Oh, come on! Don't tell me you've never had a 'woman' moment in the hospital! You know, the kind where you have to flirt just to make your day a little less mundane?"

Cai rolled his eyes, leaning back in his chair. "Flirt? I barely have time to breathe, let alone flirt! My life is filled with charts, deadlines, and making sure people don't die on my watch. Not exactly the ideal setting for romantic encounters. As for lust! I am too much of a control freak."

She knew that firsthand. Caius had such control of his desires that even she'd thought that he was not interested in her until he'd shown her differently.

"It will pass soon, won't it?"

Cai sighed, "I doubt it. Like I said this is most probably a smear campaign. Which means they are going to move to the next target. Which is most probably you. Once they find out about your existence, no matter if you are buried in the snow, those vultures will come for you. It is why I warned you. Just move into the main house. At least that way, you will be protected on all sides and not vulnerable. I've already asked Dora to arrange the security for the mansion."

"I don't need to move..."

"Move in for me, okay? To put my mind at ease."

Chapter 834: Sigh

Lily sighed deeply as she hauled the last of her belongings into the small room within the grand mansion. It felt daunting to think about how empty the space might feel, and, because Cai had been so worried about her, she'd decided to keep her concerns to herself. She hadn't fought him on this; after all, what was the point? But the thought of living all alone in this humongous place was even scarier than facing any media people.

She plopped down on the edge of the bed, letting out another sigh that mingled with the dust motes floating in the afternoon light. At least Cai had confided in her about his worries, and that brought her some comfort. If he had taken his friend's advice, they would have ended things or at least 'distanced' themselves from each other for the time being, and the mere thought of that sent a pang through her heart.

Just then, her phone rang, jolting her out of her reverie. She glanced down at the screen and saw it was her father calling. A grimace tugged at her lips as memories of their last interaction flooded back. It had been tense. Should she answer it? But she had promised him she would give him a chance to make things right. "Hello," she finally answered, her voice steady despite the unease swirling inside her.

"Lily." His voice came through, weary and strained. There was something almost defeated in his tone, a hint of sadness that made her sit up a little straighter. Had something happened? The concern began to build in her chest like a knot tightening.

"Daddy? Is everything okay" she asked, t. He let out a bitter laugh at that, a sound that echoed with years of disappointment. "Now you call me daddy, when I would have given anything to have heard you say that... Thank you, Lily. You have a big heart."

In that moment, she realized two important truths. First, she had been avoiding addressing her parents altogether referring to them as 'her parents' and not mom or dad, allowing the rift to widen without even noticing it.

And second, why did his words feel so much like a farewell? Was he preparing to leave already? A wave of bitterness rose in her throat, thick and sour. She should have expected that, even though they had claimed they would be around for a long time. But she held her tongue; if they wanted to say goodbye, then that was on them. She would not be the one to extend an olive branch.

"Lily, would you mind coming in for lunch today? If only for a little while," he continued, his voice softer now. "I'll ask your mother to stay away, if that helps."

"Lily. Would you mind coming in for Lunch today? If only for a little while. I'll ask your mother to not join us."

Lily hesitated but then immediately agreed. her father was trying and she would not punish him because of her mother. So, she told him that she'd be there to see him in an hour. As she drove there, she thought of telling Cai about this. About how her parents had reached out. She didn't know why but she'd kept it to herself for some reason, which was just foolish.

Lily hesitated for a moment, wrestling with her feelings, but then she made her decision. Her father was trying, and she wouldn't punish him because of her mother's actions. So, she agreed, telling him she would be there to see him in an hour. As she drove there, the weight of the conversation lingered in her mind. She thought about telling Cai about this—about how her parents had reached out to her again after all this time. For some reason, she had kept it to herself, which now felt foolish and she vowed to tell himself soon enough.

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"Your mother and I are going to divorce."

Lily felt her mouth drop open at his words, her breath catching in her throat. Anything she might have expected to hear in that moment—her father's apology, even the usual small talk—this was not it. Her parents were actually getting a divorce, and the reality of it felt like a punch to her gut.

Her father offered her a small, bittersweet smile, an attempt at reassurance that fell short. He sighed heavily, running a hand through his hair in a gesture that spoke of exhaustion and resignation. "I know you're shocked, and I completely understand that this is difficult for you. But, Lily, your mother and I—our relationship has been unraveling for a long time now. It started with Jasmine's illness and the way it affected both of us. Your mother... she changed too much because of her grief. It was as if she was swallowed whole by it. All this time, I stood by her side, thinking we could endure together in our shared sorrow. But she has become unwilling to understand or change, and I've reached a point where I can't bear it any longer."

He paused, and Lily could see the struggle in his eyes, the weight of unspoken emotions. "I want you to know, Lily, that I truly do want to be with my daughter. I want to be present in your life, to be a part of it in a way that feels right."

"Daddy, I... I don't know what to say," she managed, her voice trembling slightly as she fought to process the information. "Can't you and Mom work it out? I don't want you to separate because of me."

"And we are not," he replied, shaking his head firmly. "The reason for our marriage's failure is not you at all! It is your mother's inability to move on from her grief and my helplessness in failing to help her through it. I've tried everything I can think of, but it's like she's closed off a part of herself, and I can't reach her anymore. It's as if we are living in two different worlds, and no matter how much I want to help her, I can't do it alone."

Lily's heart sank further.

Chapter 835: So Be It

"You must be happy now, right?"

The words sliced through the air, and Lily looked up from the table, her body going rigid at the cold edge in her mother's voice.

Her mother stood there, arms crossed, her gaze sharp and accusing. "What are you looking at me like that for? Are you upset because I'm ruining your little celebration? Is that it?" Her voice rose, raw and bitter. "Are you even my daughter? How could you stand against your own mother, against your own family? Do you even care what you've done to us? How could you... after all these years?"

Lily felt her pulse racing as each word pierced her, but she could barely open her mouth before her mother's hands gripped her shoulders, squeezing tightly. "Are you satisfied now that your father's decided to leave me?" she shouted, her voice cracking with fury. "We've been together for decades, Lily! Decades! And now look—look at the wreckage you've left behind. Are you happy, Lily? Tell me, are you happy?"

Lily's breath caught, her mind spinning. She wanted to protest, to say something, anything to soften the torrent of anger pouring out of her mother, but she couldn't find the words. She could only stare, shocked and heartbroken that her mother would blame her for something like this.

Thankfully, before she could be completely shaken, her father who moved. He pushed back his chair, standing abruptly and in a swift, firm motion, he came across the table and pulled her mother back, trying to break her grip on Lily. His face was grim, his expression weary as he said softly, "Enough. That's enough."

"How is that enough? It is not even close to enough!" Her mother's voice was a trembling mix of fury and anguish. She took a step forward, eyes blazing. "I regret the day I gave birth to her! After everything I've done for her, all I asked was that she stay away from Jasmine's man. Just that one request! But instead, she defied me—got even closer to him, to the point of actually living with him these past few months!"

Lily's body went cold, every muscle tightening. Her mind raced, trying to process the words, trying to think how her mother had found out about this. She'd thought she had been careful to not mention it to them. She hadn't mentioned Cai, not once. Even yesterday, when her father had asked, she had brushed it off, given a vague answer, and evaded every question. Yet her mother knew—knew everything.

But her mother wasn't finished. "What is wrong with her?" she spat, turning a scathing look on Lily. "Why does she have to take everything Jasmine has? Why must she go where she isn't wanted, as if it's her right? And you!" She turned to Lily's father, her anger spilling over onto him now. "She's using you—don't you see that? She knows you feel guilty towards her, and she's taking advantage of that guilt, making you turn against me. Against your own wife!"

Her father's face remained calm, though a shadow passed over his expression. Her mother didn't seem to notice, or didn't care. She continued, her words laced with a desperate bitterness. "All these years we've been together—not once did you ever talk of separation. Not once! But now, now that we're here, now you talk about divorce?"

Her father took a deep breath and spoke as if he had already said this a thousand times. "The only reason I even suggested a separation is because you're being completely unreasonable! Cai is not Jasmine's man. He never was! Jasmine is dead! And even if Cai and Lily want to be with each other, she has every right to make her own choices. She doesn't need your approval for who she loves."

Her mother froze, her face twisting with rage. She pointed a shaking finger at Lily, her words venomous. "A right? To steal from her own sister? I always knew you'd turn out this way—a selfish, ungrateful little—" Her voice dropped to a cold, cutting whisper, "slut. That's all you are."

And with that, her mother lunged, her hand raised to strike. But this time, Lily's reflexes were quicker and her patience at an end.. She stood up and caught her mother's wrist mid-air. Her hand shook, but her grip held strong against her mother's. She looked her mother in the eye, her own gaze hard and eyes filled with tears.

"Enough," she said, her voice low and trembling with anger. "I'm done with this. I'm done with you, with this bitterness, with being the one you blame. I have a right to my life, to my own happiness—and I'm not going to let you take that away from me anymore."

She pushed away her mother's hand and prepared to leave, not bothered about convincing her father against the divorce anymore! No one needed to be subjected to someone's insanity. Not even her father!

But her mother wasn't finished. Her voice rose again, sharp and uncaring that they were in a public place where anyone could listen in. "Do you really think he'll keep you around forever?" she sneered. "He's had a parade of girlfriends before you, and you're just one in a long line! Do you think he cares about what you feel for him, that silly little crush you've harbored since you were a child? He doesn't love you, Lily. He just wants you to warm his bed, and once he's done, he'll throw you away like all the others."

Lily stopped mid-stride, her spine stiffening as her mother's words settled heavily in the air. Slowly, she turned back around, "You know what? Maybe you're right. Maybe he is using me, maybe I'm just a way for him to satisfy his physical urges and to remind himself of Jasmine." She shrugged her shoulders, a faint, almost bitter smile touching her lips. "So be it. Maybe he's looking for someone to replace Jasmine. Fine. If that's what he needs, then I'll be that person."

Chapter 836: Breaking News

"Dr. Caius Frost Accused of Manipulating Young Woman's Longstanding Crush"

Confession: "I am a replacement for Jasmine. I don't care."

In a shocking revelation, sources close to Dr. Caius Frost, the celebrated young neurosurgeon, claim he may be using his late girlfriend's younger sister, Lily, as a mere "replacement." The accusations paint a troubling picture of Dr. Frost as someone taking advantage of Lily's longstanding feelings, allegedly aware of her childhood crush on him and choosing to view her as a convenient stand-in for her sister, Jasmine.

Insiders close to the family reveal that Lily seems resigned to her role, reportedly stating, "Maybe he is using me... maybe I'm just a way for him to satisfy himself. If that's what he needs, then I'll be that person."

These statements, filled with apparent heartbreak and disillusionment, have stirred public opinion, dividing fans and onlookers alike. Many express sympathy for Lily, viewing her words as a glimpse into her conflicted emotions, while others are shocked at what they see as Caius Frost's manipulation of his late girlfriend's sister.

On social media, opinions vary widely. Some netizens argue that because Lily seems aware of her role as a replacement, the situation is not as scandalous as it might seem. "She knows what she's getting into—she's making her own choices," one user commented while another stated that even they would be willing to act as a stand-in for the handsome Caius Frost.

However, a larger wave of netizens are voicing outrage, denouncing Dr. Frost for what they consider unethical and emotionally damaging behavior.

"If he's aware of her feelings and is still willing to use her like this, it's incredibly selfish and cold-hearted," another commenter wrote. "For someone in the medical field, he's doing serious emotional harm."

As Dr. Caius Frost's public image continues to take a hit, industry colleagues and acquaintances remain silent, awaiting either clarification or denial from Dr. Frost himself, though if we take into account the previous rumours circulating about him then his trustworthy reputation might be taking a hit. This scandal has cast a shadow over his budding career in neurosurgery, leaving many wondering if such personal controversies will affect his professional reputation.

Rafe closed yet another tab on his laptop, the countless headlines and threads all echoing the same damning story. He glanced over at Cai, who sat with a frown, a far away look on his face as he stared down at his own screen, possibly reading the documents in front of him.

Rafe finally spoke up, his tone sharp. "Are you sure you warned her, Cai? This mess is exactly what I said would happen if this got out." But he received no reply or acknowledgement from Cai as he continued to stare at his phone.

Rafe shook his head, his expression a mixture of frustration and sympathy at his friend. "Well, now it's everywhere. I've already contacted the legal team to get a defamation and slander case going along with spreading of false rumors. We'll do what we can to control this. You might have to ask Lily to get involved in this. In fact, if she can just add something on her social media page..." He paused as his phone buzzed, checking the caller ID before stepping away to take it. A minute later, he returned, his face clouded with a thundering expression

"That was the team," he said, crossing his arms as he looked down at Cai. "They're saying the quotes are real, Cai. Apparently, Lily actually said those words, and they have evidence."

Cai's hand tightened around his phone as he stared at Rafe, finally taken out of her stupor. "Lily wouldn't say something like that... not to the press. She—" He broke off, glancing back at his phone with growing frustration. "She's not answering any of my calls or messages, and now she's out of reach. I don't know what's going on."

Rafe's brow furrowed, his eyes narrowing as he considered the situation. "Are you sure you can trust her, Cai? I mean, do you really know if she's fully on your side?"

Cai scoffed, brushing off Rafe's concerns with a wave of his hand. "Of course she's on my side," he replied, his tone hardening defensively. "Lily's not like that. She's been through enough herself; she's not the type to sell someone out for a quick profit."

Rafe sighed, crossing his arms as he leaned against the desk, his gaze steady. "Maybe you're right. But Cai, sometimes money changes people. She's had a thing for you, sure, but she's also been well aware of your... comfortable circumstances. She's a struggling student living on the bare minimum; it's not easy for someone in her position. And this whole mess could've presented her with a pretty tempting opportunity."

Cai's jaw tightened, the idea visibly hitting him, despite his reluctance to believe it. "So you're suggesting she just... what? Sold me out to the tabloids?" he said, his voice low but laced with disbelief.

"Look, I'm just saying, you need to keep a realistic view here," Rafe continued calmly. "Maybe she thought it wouldn't blow up this badly. Or maybe the press twisted her words—but whatever the case, she said what she said. And if they've got her confession on record..." He trailed off, leaving the unsaid implications hanging heavily in the air.

"She's not answering your calls. She's disappeared without a word," he murmured, "If she was loyal... she'd at least talk to you."

Rafe placed a steady hand on his shoulder. "Look, Cai, sometimes people have reasons for what they do that have nothing to do with loyalty. Maybe she's been struggling in ways you don't even know. This is tough on you both, but you need to be careful about who you put your faith in right now. Just be sure before you go down defending her blindly. People are already going on about how you are not yet mature enough to handle all this power and stuff...and demanding a resignation."

At those words, Cai stood up and walked out of the office, "Don't do anything for now, Rafe. I'll make sure this does not affect you ultimately.

#### Chapter 837: Unbelievable

"You are not God, you know. You could be wrong." Erasmi Frost let out a slow, measured sigh, looking at his son's face through the screen with a mixture of irritation and concern as he stared back stubbornly. "And sometimes, Cai, we are wrong. I was wrong about your birth mother, wasn't I?"

Cai's jaw tightened, and he folded his arms, his gaze steady and challenging even though he ignored the jibe. "Well, maybe, but we'll never know for sure, will we? She was dead before you could ever really know her long term. Besides, I'd like to think I'm a better judge of character. People aren't as hard to read as you are trying to make them out to be."

Erasmi raised an eyebrow, a flash of amusement mingling with exasperation. "Is this supposed to be some late-blooming rebellion hitting you in your mid-twenties? A sudden enlightenment that you know better than your father?"

Cai rolled his eyes, but a smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. "Come on, Dad! It's just a favor, alright? A simple one. But hey, if you're feeling too old to handle it..." Cai's tone turned mischievous. "Just let me know. I'll ask Uncle Demon. He won't hesitate."

Erasmi's expression hardened, his voice sharp with affront. "Demetri is the same age as me, Cai."

Cai shrugged with mock innocence, eyes dancing. "Technically, he's younger than you. By a few minutes, sure—but younger is younger."

The playful look in Cai's eyes met his father's intense stare, but he didn't flinch. Erasmi opened his mouth to lay down a firm refusal when Cai's demeanor shifted. He leaned forward, his tone softening, the hint of humor gone. "Dad, look—I'm genuinely worried about her. Everyone thinks she just took the money and ran, disappeared after making that statement. But it doesn't sit right with me. I can't go looking for her right now, but you can. And I trust you to do it, to get to the bottom of this. Please?"

Erasmi let out a longer sigh, glancing away from the screen as if searching for patience. He couldn't quite ignore the hint of worry behind his son's request. "Alright, alright. I'll go take a look. But listen carefully, Caius Demetri Frost—if it turns out she really did sell you out, you'll be regretting ever sending me to her door."

Cai's eyes shone with relief, a smirk playing on his lips. "I know, Dad. I wouldn't ask if I wasn't sure. That's how much I trust her. Just... go find her, okay?"

"Alright," Erasmi said, nodding with a grin. "Send me the coordinates. I'll take Ava with me, and we'll make this our second honeymoon."

"Dad!" Cai exclaimed, covering his eyes as if he could block the thought. "I do not need that kind of visual! And what second honeymoon? You go on one every year!"

Erasmi shrugged, his grin turning mischievous. "Then consider this our second honeymoon of the year!"

Cai let out an exaggerated groan, laughing and shaking his head. "Ew, Dad! Just... fine. Go, go. The sooner you're out there, the better."

As the laughter faded, Erasmi's face softened, and he looked at his son with a trace of pride and a hint of nostalgia. "You've grown up, kiddo. You know, when you said you needed my help, I thought it was because you wanted backup to take down whoever's been trying to push you around—or, at the very least, that you wanted me to help with the investigation..."

Cai gave a faint smile, a little embarrassed but mostly reassured. "You taught me well, Dad. I can investigate on my own." His voice softened. "Just... take care of her for me, alright?"

Erasmi's expression turned serious for a moment as he nodded, his voice steady. "I will. You have my word. Don't worry and you take care of yourself."

Cai nodded to himself and leaned back in his chair, feeling a sense of relief settle over him. With Dad on the case, she'd be safe; if there was anything out of place, his father would pick up on it. She should be alright, he reassured himself, mentally ticking off his worries. His father's instincts had always been sharp, and if anyone could uncover the truth, it was him.

Now, with his mind at ease, Cai knew he couldn't waste time. He'd have to follow up on his end, and the next step meant reaching out to a trusted mentor. He picked up his phone, scrolling through his contacts until he found the entry labeled "Prof. Whitmore." Cai hadn't spoken to him in months, but if there was ever a time to call, it was now.

He pressed the call button, and as soon as the line connected, he greeted, "Professor Whitmore! How's it going?"

There was a short silence before a familiar, disgruntled voice responded. "You selfish little brat! Trouble finally hits, and now you remember this poor old man? Should I be flattered, or just lie down and play dead?"

Cai chuckled, unable to help himself. "Come on, Professor! That's not true—I'd definitely send flowers for your funeral, at the very least."

"You cheeky devil!" the professor barked with mock indignation. "If you even think of sending flowers instead of hauling your ungrateful self to my grave, I'll come back to haunt you personally!"

"Okay, okay!" Cai laughed, picturing his old professor's irate expression. "Besides, you're already terrifying enough alive. Imagine how much worse it'd be if you were actually out to haunt me!"

A grumble sounded on the other end. "Listen here, you brat. I've been expecting this call of yours, you know. Thought you'd dial sooner, but you took your sweet time." There was a pause, then Whitmore added with satisfaction, "So, I went ahead and pulled some strings, did some digging. Thought I'd save you the trouble."

Cai's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "You already got what I need? I knew I could count on you."

"Yes, yes, don't butter me up." Whitmore's tone softened slightly, his usual gruffness tinged with something more approving. "I've looked into those reports—and trust me, if there's one thing I'm sure of, it's that they're nonsense. You've got plenty of proof to show you weren't 'playing around' these past few years, despite what they say. Now, all that's left is to get your young lady to step forward and clear things up. She needs to give an explanation—one that'll put this mess to bed once and for all."

"I know," Cai said, determination sharpening his voice. "I'll talk to her, Professor. Thank you for everything. Really."

"Yeah, yeah," the professor replied, though the warmth in his tone betrayed his fondness. "Thank-yous don't count unless you pay me a visit afterward. Bring the girl along, too. I want to meet the one who's somehow captured the heart of Cai Frost."

Cai grinned, shaking his head. "How did you know she's... special?"

Whitmore huffed a laugh. "It's obvious, you fool. Since when do you hold back when someone crosses you? Normally, you'd be the first to shout your grievances to the world. But this time, you've been suspiciously quiet. If you're hesitating, it's because she means something to you. Now get out there, settle this, and don't wait for my funeral to come around before you bring her to see me."

Cai chuckled, the sound full of genuine appreciation. "Will do, Professor. Just hold on—I'll be seeing you soon."

Hanging up, Cai leaned back in his chair, feeling a renewed sense of focus. Whitmore had been right; he hadn't reacted the way he normally would, and it was all because of Lily! If it had been another woman, he would not have thought of waiting and letting things play out.

As he received the email, he got to work. As expected, Professor Whitmore had not just pulled up his long work hours and travel schedule but also the time he had done some things...

His eyes caught another name as he saw the longs and suddenly everything seemed to be clicking into place. Professor Ellis. The man had found himself in similar circumstances during the time Cai was in the university. Cai had personally made sure the man was caught and exposed since he had dared to touch a friend of his...

Sighing, Cai leaned back, rubbing his temples. "Damn," he muttered under his breath. Dam\*! How had he missed this? Hurriedly, he made a call and without waiting for Rafe to answer, he muttered, "Doctor Ellis White. Look for him. See if he has anything to do with these articles or the publishers about me or if anyone is related to him."

"Who is this man?" Rafe asked before Cai could disconnect and continued, "Come on, Cai. Are you trying to look for someone else to blame when it should be your girlfriend."

"My girlfriend is not running a smear campaign against me! But this Ellis White might as well be Rafe. He has motive and the means."

Rafe sighed, "Fine fine. I'll look this person up. Also, just so you know, the investors are already creating a ruckus about taking you off the board. So, you need to work faster."

"I'll ask someone from my team to set up a meeting, Rafe. They will be silenced once I have my things in order."

Chapter 838: Please

"Will you please stop? Just give me my phone."

"No! Your father is sick! At a time like this, you should not be looking at your phone but praying for his well-being. Stay here with me, in this prayer room."

Lily's shoulders tensed as she sat back down on the narrow, uncomfortable bench in the hospital chapel. The air was heavy with the scent of incense, making it hard to breathe but it was her mother that made things even more difficult for her. Her mother's voice had taken on an almost frantic edge, more urgent than ever before, as if the intensity of her devotion alone could somehow heal the man lying unconscious just a few floors away.

Her father had suffered a heart attack—serious enough that the emergency surgery, while successful, was only the beginning of a long and uncertain road to recovery. The doctors' words rang in her ears: extensive damage, years of neglect, time to regain consciousness... phrases that had carved fear into the pit of her stomach. And now, the waiting. The endless, torturous waiting.

Since the moment they had rushed to the hospital, her mother had transformed from a cold, judgmental figure into an almost obsessive presence. The woman who had hurled cruel words and shut Lily out had seemingly forgotten all the bitter exchange that had culminated into her walking out on her parents again and her father collapsing with a heart attack. Now she was clinging, insistent, eyes wide with alarm as she pulled Lily into hours of whispered prayers and fervent pleas for divine intervention.

Lily had actually not expected this. From the moment she'd admitted her father here and signed the forms, she'd expected her mother to pin the blame for all this on her shoulders as well but her mother had been surprisingly clingy.

Lily pressed her lips together, holding back a sigh. Her mother's sharp eyes darted to her, daring her to break the moment. With reluctance, Lily bowed her head, clasping her hands as if she were part of the prayer. She whispered a few words, but they felt empty. The guilt in her chest wouldn't ease.

If she had stayed, hadn't distanced herself from her parents, would this have happened? Would her father have taken better care of himself? The questions wouldn't stop. She could almost hear Cai's voice telling her not to blame herself, reminding her that years of stubborn habits weren't hers to change. And her first duty had been to protect herself and her sanity.

She knew he would be right, but that didn't make the guilt any lighter or the pain any less.

She needed to hear Cai's voice. The need was like an ache in her chest. He was her anchor, cutting through her spiraling thoughts. She had let her mother take her phone without protest, seeing the desperation in her eyes. Instead, she handled the paperwork and spoke to the doctors in a calm, steady voice.

But now, with her mother still praying, Lily couldn't ignore the urge any longer. She had to call Cai, had to let him know what was happening. He was probably worried, wondering why she hadn't reached out in so many days. She gave a bitter smile. She didn't even know how many days had passed in all this time.

Lily took a deep breath, steadyng her voice as she tried to reason with her again, " I need my phone. Please, just for a minute."

Her mother's eyes snapped open, narrowing as she turned to face her. The sharpness in her gaze was a stark contrast to the pleading tone she had taken moments before. "No, Lily. I told you, not until your father recovers. You've done enough already."

Lily flinched the accusatory words cutting through her, reminding her of what she had just been thinking. "What do you mean, I've done enough? I'm trying to help, trying to be here for him, for you."

Her mother's voice dropped to a low, tremulous whisper, one that dripped with exhaustion and bitterness. "If you hadn't done what you did, maybe he wouldn't be lying in that bed. Maybe we wouldn't be here now. You walked out, then you created problems with us and then had to rub your selfishness and lack of character in his face and look where that's gotten us. Your father fighting for his life, and you want to talk to someone else? No, Lily. The only thing that matters now is prayer, not distractions. And I can already guess what it could be!"

The weight of her mother's words pressed on her chest like a boulder. She should have expected this! It was only a matter of time before her mother would blame her for everything going wrong! Lily's fingers curled into fists, nails biting into her palms. She felt the rush of frustration, guilt, and helplessness inside her. This wasn't the time to argue, but she also couldn't stand here and let it swallow her whole.

Without another word, she stood and walked out of that chapel. She could pray for her father elsewhere! Once outside, the air somehow felt cooler, clearer. She let out a shaky breath and ran her hands through her hair, willing herself to keep it together.

Then she looked up and froze. Standing a few feet away was Cai. His presence was so familiar, so grounding, that for a moment she couldn't move or speak.

"Lily," he said softly, stepping closer. "I came as soon as I heard. How are you?"

The tension she had been holding onto unraveled all at once, and she felt the sting of tears she hadn't let fall. Before she could respond, he reached out and pulled her into a hug, his arms wrapping around her with a warmth that broke through the numbness spreading within her.

"I'm here," he whispered. "You're not alone."

Just hearing the words made her realize just how alone she had been and the tear that she'd been holding back all this time, simply started to fall as she held him close.

#### Chapter 839: Anger

Somehow, for the rest of the day, Lily felt as if she was wrapped in a protective cocoon, shielded from everything harsh and painful in the world. Instead of waiting in the chapel, they were now sitting in a small, quiet room upstairs. Cai had arranged for a private space where she could freshen up, even thinking ahead to bring her a change of clothes. The silence felt thick, pressing on her as she sat on the edge of the chair, fingers fidgeting in her lap. The doctor had just gone into the ICU for a round, leaving them in a lull. Lily took a breath, steadying herself before turning to Cai, the question on her lips finally breaking free.

"Why did you ask me about my phone?"

The moment she had finished washing up, Cai had been quick to question her about it. When she told him her phone was with her mother—who'd kept it since her father's sudden collapse—something in him shifted. His expression turned tight, and for a moment, she thought she saw a flash of anger in his eyes. And then later, when she mentioned that she would go and get her mother, he had stopped her with a firm shake of his head.

"Leave her in the chapel for now," he'd said, his voice oddly restrained.

A worried frown creased her brow, deepening when he avoided meeting her eyes. Yes, he was angry, but why? The silence stretched, and a different question nudged at her mind.

"How did you find me?" she asked, her voice quieter, as if she feared the answer. "I'm so far from where I was before. A kind man at the hotel called for an air ambulance and got us here."

Cai's jaw tightened, his muscles working as he listened. The man had been anything but 'kind,' but Cai held back, the words caught in the tension of his mouth. He inhaled slowly, choosing his response with care.

"You were out of touch, and I was worried," he said, his voice lower now, rough around the edges. "So, I asked Dad to help. He managed to track you down through your father's insurance company."

Lily blinked, processing this new piece of information. The room felt smaller suddenly, and her heartbeat quickened as she studied Cai's stiff posture. There was more to this story, she could feel it, but the walls around him were up, solid and unmoving.

"Cai..."

"Not now, Lily. Trust me for now, okay?"

She nodded slowly and then turned to look ahead, waiting for the doctor to return. Just then, a nurse walked in followed by her mother.

Cai stiffened at the sight of her, and the older woman too came to an abrupt stop as soon as her eyes met the Cai's cold glare. The expression on the woman's face twisted into something ugly, and she nearly snarled, "What are you doing here?"

Cai didn't respond at first, his gaze locked onto the woman with barely restrained anger. The tension crackled in the air like a storm about to break, and it was Lily who sensed the brewing conflict and quickly stepped in between them.

"Did you need something?" Lily asked, trying to keep her voice steady and calm.

The woman's eyes shifted to Lily, filled with disdain as she sneered. "Do I need something? It seems you're the one who needed something! Your man! Have you no shame, Lily? I told you to focus on praying for your father. I begged you to put your energy into thinking of him at a time like this. But what do you do?" She scoffed, her voice dripping with venom. "You find a way to drag him close and then

move to a new room? Couldn't this wait until your father recovered? Did you really have to be such a hopeless, desperate slut?"

"You—" Cai's voice cracked through the tension, low and dangerous. For the first time, he felt the raw urge to lash out, to really hurt this woman who stood so carelessly close to the edge of his control. She had no idea how near she was to the danger he carried.

Before the moment could spiral further, Lily placed a gentle hand on his arm, stopping him from advancing.

He turned to look at her and wanted to lash out and tell her. Tell her everything her mother had done. But Lily didn't know. He could see that and even now, she was trying to handle her mother.

He watched as she drew in a breath and spoke up politely, "Ma'am, if you have questions or concerns about my father, go ahead and ask. But I won't stand here and listen to unfounded accusations. If you'd like to come in and take a moment to freshen up or rest, you're welcome. If not, you can wait in the chapel. I'll come and update you once the doctor informs me about my dad's condition."

The woman's face flushed with anger as she snapped back, "Let me know? I don't need you to let me know anything! You can leave now—with that disgusting man."

Cai's eyes darkened at her words, and Lily felt the tension between them spike again, but she held her ground, her fingers pressing gently into Cai's arm as a silent plea to stay calm.

Thankfully, the doctor appeared just then. As if not able to sense the tension in the room, even though it was thick enough that it could be cut with a knife, the doctor announced, "Miss Lily. The patient is doing much better today. His body may have given out but he has been showing remarkable spirit. We will be moving him to the general ward after today's observation so you will be able to go and see him soon. He will also be conscious by then. Of course there would be some precautions that you need to take, specifically no stress for him and the nurse will explain the rest to you."

Chapter 840: Look

Lily's gaze shifted to the young child's voice that rang out clearly in the hallway. "Mom. Look, it's the replacement girl."

A quick shush from the mother silenced the child, but the sharp, disapproving glare the woman cast in Lily's direction confused her. Replacement girl? The phrase pricked at her curiosity and made her wonder if they had confused her for someone else—perhaps a member of the hospital staff who had displeased them. The unpleasant thought made her frown, but when the pair turned away and resumed their conversation, she shook off the feeling and continued down the corridor. They were probably mistaken.

She had barely reached the nurse's station when a familiar face approached. It was the nurse who had been handling her father's case for the past few days, her expression filled with concern.

"Miss Lily, are you alright?" the nurse asked, her voice softly, her eyes searching.

Lily blinked, surprised by the sudden question. She felt a flicker of confusion but managed a slow nod. "Yes, of course. I'm fine," she replied, though her voice sounded uncertain even to her own ears. She was fine in the sense of the word maybe.

The nurse's brow creased, and she hesitated for a moment before continuing. "If I'm not mistaken, your boyfriend is Doctor Caius Frost, correct? He was here a couple of hours ago, with you?"

Lily nodded again, this time more slowly. The confusion deepened as she remembered Cai's visit. He'd stayed with her as long as he could, reassuring her that he would return soon. He had seemed preoccupied, as if a heavy weight rested on his mind. Now, this nurse's odd behavior only added to her growing unease. Was something wrong with him?

"Is something wrong?" Lily asked, her eyes searching the nurse's face for clues. The nurse met her gaze for a moment, then shook her head.

"No, Miss Lily. Everything is under control," the nurse said, though her tone was anything but convincing. "Your father is stable, and your mother is getting the rest she needs after collapsing from exhaustion. You should go and rest while you can. It's important."

A hint of apprehension stirred in Lily's chest at the nurse's cryptic expression. "Rest before what? What do you mean by 'before the storm'?"

The nurse's lips tightened as if she regretted letting that slip. "It's nothing. Just a figure of speech, since both your parents are depending on you," she said hastily, avoiding Lily's questioning look. "Please, get some rest."

Exhaustion settled heavily on Lily's shoulders. The stress of the past few days, the endless running around, and the new worry of her mother's unexpected admission into the hospital pressed down on her. She nodded, unable to argue, and turned away. The nurse's odd words lingered in her mind, but her body craved a break more than it needed answers. Her father had been shifted to a normal room but was unconscious and her mother was sleeping in the same room on the bed next to him, since she'd collapsed from anxiety and exhaustion about an hour ago.

Returning to the private room Cai had arranged for her, Lily pushed the door open and leaned against the wall. The sterile scent of the hospital clung to her senses, mingling with the dull hum of distant activity. She closed her eyes, breathing in deeply, willing herself to shut out the questions and the tension. For now, she needed a moment of quiet—just a moment. She slid down and with her head on her knees, caught some sleep.

Still unaware of the storm brewing outside her little world, she remained in the room, safe.

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"The Replacement girl Has No Idea." Even before, Lily had fully fallen asleep, she had no idea that she'd unexpectedly started a new trending topic almost turning into a big celebrity.

As expected, the netizens were not letting the story rest. The drama around Cai and his so-called "string" of relationships just kept growing. People online wouldn't stop talking about it and in the lack of any information had simply started adding their own twists. Now, the big rumor everyone believed? Cai was still so in love with his dead girlfriend that he was dating her younger sister as a replacement.

The story had spread fast, picking up wild new details with every post and comment. The idea had taken off: Cai, the grieving boyfriend, leaning on Lily because she reminded him of what he'd lost. The online story made him look like a guy trapped in the past, trying to fill a void while Lily had been turned into being a cunning woman who was using his feelings, taking advantage of him and still playing the victim.

And because Cai and Lily both stayed quiet with no posts, no comments, nothing. Their silence made people talk more. Was it because they were guilty? Was the "replacement" thing true? Or did they just not care enough to get involved in the mess?

New comments popped up every day. "Lily needs to clear the air," some said. "Cai, speak up already," others demanded. But no matter how much pressure built, they didn't say a word. The rumors and theories kept swirling.

And that's when the nurse, who had just finished speaking with Lily, posted a photo online. The nurse was known for being a bit of a gossip, always eager to share what she knew, but she was kind-hearted too. The picture showed Cai holding Lily tightly as she broke down in his arms, her face buried in his shoulder. The nurse's caption changed the entire narrative, bringing on the latest trending topic.

"The so-called 'replacement girl' has actually been here in the hospital for the past five days, ever since the whole drama started. Honestly, I didn't even recognize her at first, not until I saw Dr. Cai with her. Her father's been admitted, and she's spent every waking moment here. If she wasn't making arrangements or talking to doctors, she was in the chapel, praying."