

Benefits 851

Chapter 851: Worried

"You do realize my hands are my bread and butter, right?" Cai teased, his lips curling into a playful smirk. "If you keep squeezing like that, I won't be able to do surgery for quite a while."

Lily's eyes darted to their joined hands, her face heating with embarrassment. Her fingers had turned into a vice grip without her even realizing it. She exhaled a shaky breath, silently commanding herself to loosen her hold. Relax, Lily. Relax. Stop crushing the poor guy's hand.

Easier said than done.

Her brain issued the orders, but her hands outright refused to cooperate. She could feel the warmth of his skin against hers, the reassuring steadiness of his presence, but that only seemed to make her more aware of her spiraling nerves.

"I'm sorry," she mumbled, her voice barely above a whisper. "I'm just... really nervous."

Cai chuckled, the sound rich and unbothered, as if he hadn't just been subjected to her iron grip. "I noticed." Gently, he pried her fingers free, one by one, his touch deliberate and patient. He flipped his hand over and wrapped it around hers, his thumb brushing lightly over the back of her hand in soothing strokes.

"Relax," he said, his tone low and reassuring. "They're going to love you. I promise. And you'll like them too. You might even end up wondering why you were so worried in the first place."

"You think so?" she asked softly, trying to mask that feeling of vulnerability and fear of rejection pressing down on her.

"I know so," Cai replied without hesitation, giving her hand a comforting squeeze. "You've got nothing to prove, Lily. Just be yourself."

Lily shot him a sideways look, her lips twitching into a small, reluctant smile before she sighed and rested her head against his shoulder. "Cai... you're the best," she murmured, her voice soft but genuine.

Cai's grin widened as he tilted his head slightly, rubbing his cheek against her hair in a gesture that was both playful and affectionate. "Of course I am. I knew that already, but it's nice to hear it every now and then. A little acknowledgment never hurts," he teased, his tone light and breezy.

A giggle escaped Lily, her nerves easing as warmth filled her chest. She kept her gaze fixed on their joined hands, her fingers tracing lazy patterns against his skin. After a beat, she sighed again, her tone growing more serious. "I meant it, though. I wanted to thank you... for talking to my mother."

Cai's expression softened, the humor fading as he exhaled slowly. "It's going to be a long journey, Lily," he said gently, his voice carrying both understanding and gravity. "Forgiving and forgetting doesn't happen overnight. You've been through so much because of her, and she deserves to know that—really know it. But it's good she's trying, that she's willing to understand the pain she caused. And going to counseling? That's a huge step forward. Uncle Kingston had the right idea suggesting it."

"I know it's not going to be easy," she admitted, her voice barely above a whisper. "But... I want to try. For both of us. When that news came out and I realized that she was the one who had done it, I was shattered.. I didn't know what to make of it. Until now, I always convinced myself that it was her grief for Jasmine that continued to make her like that towards me. But to deliberately plot against me and have someone record our conversation and then to goad me into saying those things... I'd given up, Cai. Given up the hope of ever having a mother."

Cai patted her hand and let his head rest on her as the car continued to cruise forward. After all, there was nothing he could say to console her. Of course she had been hurt. And Mrs Kingston may have not known the extent of her actions, but she was still responsible for the hurt she had inflicted, knowingly and unknowingly. The only reason he had even tried to remain civil to Mrs Kingston was that the lady had tried to correct her mistake by providing the recording of that Merton leading them to having solid proof against Professor White.

Realizing she'd unintentionally darkened the mood, Lily let out a quiet sigh and turned her head slightly to look at him. Her lips curled into a faint, apologetic smile. "Okay," she said, her tone deliberately lighter. "Tell me once again—who else is going to be there?"

Cai arched a brow at her obvious attempt to steer the conversation onto safer ground, a knowing smile playing on his lips.

"Well, my parents will be there, of course. They're the hosts, after all. Then there's my uncle Demon and Aunt Nora—you'll love Nora. She's full of mischief but in the best way possible. And my cousins—an assortment of them, really, coming from all over. They range from about fourteen years old to four months old. It's hard to keep track of who's confirmed and who might flake last minute, but Uncle Seb and Aunt Olivia are definitely coming."

"It's shaping up to be a big gathering, but honestly, that's how it always is with my family. Organized chaos."

Lily tilted her head slightly, curiosity gleaming in her eyes. "Is there a particular occasion? Or is this just a 'let's get everyone together because we can' kind of thing?"

Cai's grin widened as if he'd been waiting for her to ask. "It's actually a two-fold celebration," he explained,

"A celebration?" Lily prompted,

He nodded, his voice carrying a note of pride. "My younger cousin, Innocensa—she's just won a gold medal at the International Youth Games. It's a huge deal, and we're throwing a party in her honor.

"Oh, wow. And what's the other reason? You said it was a two fold celebration."

Cai's grin turned sly, and before she could react, he leaned in and stole a quick, feather-light kiss. The suddenness of it left her blinking in surprise, and his laughter rumbled as he pulled back, clearly pleased with himself.

"Cai!" she exclaimed, her cheeks warming.

He shrugged nonchalantly, though the sparkle in his eyes betrayed his amusement. "The other reason," he said, his tone growing softer, "is us. Everyone wants to meet you, Lily. They're excited to finally see the person who's managed to make me so happy."

Chapter 852: Chaos

Lily wasn't sure where to focus her gaze as the car turned into the long driveway leading to the large house. Cai had mentioned in passing that he had a lot of cousins, but nothing could have prepared her for the sheer whirlwind of chaos that greeted her. The entire front yard was alive with energy—a kaleidoscope of children of all ages running, shouting, and crying. A few adults darted around, trying in vain to corral the younger ones, while the older children seemed to manage themselves, sometimes even herding the littlest ones back in line.

The car had barely come to a stop when the children spotted them. Before Lily could fully process the scene, an enthusiastic swarm descended upon them. Cai barely managed to take two steps out of the car before being completely engulfed. Two little girls, giggling madly, clambered up him like he was a jungle gym, tugging at his arms as they demanded to sit on his shoulders. Not far behind, two boys followed him closely, as if they were his personal shadows, talking over each other in rapid-fire sentences.

Within moments, Cai was overwhelmed but not in the least flustered. The children had successfully toppled him onto the ground, and now they were crawling all over him like puppies claiming their favorite human. One girl tugged at his sleeve, asking about a promised story, while another held out her arms, waiting for a lift. Cai chuckled, his laughter lost in the cacophony of voices calling his name, each child demanding his undivided attention.

Lily stood by the car, unable to suppress the laugh bubbling out of her as she took in the scene. Cai, normally so composed, was now completely at the mercy of his cousins, though he seemed to be enjoying every second of it. Just when she thought the chaos had peaked, a tiny boy with chubby cheeks and an air of self-importance waddled determinedly toward the fray. With surprising authority, he pushed his way through the tangled limbs of the other children, shoving them aside with single-minded purpose. Finally, he climbed onto Cai's lap and plopped down with all the regal confidence of a king reclaiming his throne.

Lily had to cover her mouth to stifle another laugh as she watched the scene, her own nervousness forgotten. This was the cutest scene. Cai wasn't just handling the children—he was thriving amidst the chaos, as if he had an innate ability to connect with each of them, even when they were all speaking at once. She doubted he'd even noticed her watching, too immersed in his dear cousins.

Wanting to capture this moment, she quickly pulled out her cell phone and started recording the entire chaos in front of her. However, she'd only captured for a few seconds when she suddenly felt someone tap her shoulders. She turned around but before she could even clearly see the person, the girl, almost as tall as her, leaned forward and gave her an air kiss and then another. "You must be Lily."

Lily blinked and nodded as she looked at the girl in awe. The girl was a beauty. The kind that made people want to go and lie down on a beach to get the tanned look. She was naturally tanned and as she grinned at her, she realized, this girl was probably the one who had won the medal. She had the same smile as Cai... only a bit more feminine.

"You must be Innocensa. Congratulations on the win."

The girl clapped her hands in excitement, "So, Cai has told you about me? Yes! I was so jealous when Aunt Dora said that she'd met you and I had not. It's so nice meeting you, Lily! Welcome to the family."

And then, before Lily could say anything, she was kissed on both cheeks again and the girl had already skipped over to Cai, casually sitting beside him.

"You just made Ines' day! She would have been disappointed if you hadn't known her." A young voice called from behind him and Lily finally realized that what Cai meant when he said that the Frosts were easily recognisable. They all looked like different versions of the same base model. It was disconcerting.

"Well then, I'm glad I did not disappoint her. Hi, Vincenso." Lily's voice was warm, and the boy's eyes widened in surprise. His cheeks flushed pink as he realized she knew his name.

"You—he told you about me too?" Vincenso asked, his voice a mix of shyness and curiosity.

Lily simply smiled. Cai had indeed mentioned a little about each of his cousins during their drive, but she wasn't about to admit that she barely remembered half of what he'd said. Luckily, the boy didn't press her for details. Instead, he straightened up a bit, clearly pleased, and said, "Mum told me to bring you inside. Cai's been taken away by those little pests, and I don't think they're letting him go anytime soon. There's no need for you to stand out here in the sun. Come on in."

Lily hesitated, glancing back at Cai. Sure enough, he was still surrounded by the swarm of children. It was clear they had no intention of letting him go without a fight. And she would not dare to fight such a battle.

Still, the idea of walking into the house without him made her stomach flip. She had pictured them going in together, Cai by her side, easing her nerves as she faced his family. Now, it seemed she was about to go in alone, following a boy she had only just met.

With a small sigh, she nodded at Vincenso. "Alright, lead the way," she said, her voice steady even though she felt a flicker of uncertainty.

Vincenso grinned, looking far too pleased with his new responsibility. He turned on his heel and started toward the house, glancing back every few steps to make sure Lily was following.

Cai turned his head, scanning the yard for Lily, and almost swore out loud. Just a moment ago, she had been standing right there, watching him with that amused little smile.

Panic flashed through him. He shifted, trying not to topple the small army of children still crawling over him. "Alright, alright," he said, his voice firm but gentle, "I've got something for you."

He fished into his pocket and pulled out a handful of sweets he had stashed away earlier. "Who wants these?" he asked, his tone conspiratorial.

A chorus of excited squeals erupted, and the children quickly swarmed around him, reaching for the treats. Cai handed them out as fast as he could, murmuring promises of more later if they let him go for now.

The moment he was free, he scrambled to his feet, dusting himself off. Without a backward glance, he then made a beeline for the house. He wasn't about to let Lily walk into his family's chaos all by herself.

Chapter 853: Unexpected

The moment Cai stepped into the chaos that was his family home, the sheer volume of voices and laughter hit him like a wall. He paused wondering where he should look for her. the way Kael had been taken aside for interrogation, if she was going to be subjected to something similar.

What he didn't expect was the scene that unfolded before him.

In the middle of the living room, Lily stood there cradling little Aranya in her arms, her soft voice humming a tune as she kissed the baby's head. The sight made him pause mid-step.

For a moment, he simply stared, blinking as if his mind couldn't process what he was seeing. A strange thought lodged itself in his brain, one so ridiculous he almost laughed at himself. Baby fever. That was a thing, right? But wasn't it something women usually got? How in the world had he, a grown man, fallen prey to it?

Because that's exactly what it felt like. Seeing Lily, glowing with a maternal warmth he didn't even know she had, holding his little cousin like she was the most precious thing in the world, sent his heart somersaulting in his chest. Or maybe it was lower in his stomach, a sensation he refused to call 'butterflies'. He wasn't the kind of guy that got butterflies. But whatever it was, it made him feel a little unhinged.

And then she looked up.

Her gaze caught his, and her lips curved into a soft, serene smile that nearly knocked the breath out of him and caught him off guard. It was something gentler, something that made his chest tighten in ways he wasn't prepared for.

She held that smile for a heartbeat before turning back to Aranya, resuming making odd expression to coax a smile out of her.

Cai felt faint. Legitimately faint.

And then, just as he was gathering his scrambled thoughts, Uncle Lucien's heavy hand clapped down on his shoulder, jolting him out of his daze. The sudden force nearly sent him stumbling forward.

"Alright, kiddo," Lucien said, his voice rich with amusement as he gave Cai a knowing look. "Get rid of that expression. She's too young for all that."

Cai blinked, his mouth opening and closing like a fish as he struggled to form words. "What expression?" he finally managed, his voice slightly higher-pitched than he intended.

Lucy chuckled, his grin widening. "The one that says you're two seconds away from going full caveman. You know, tying her to the hearth and home, intent on making babies."

Heat rushed to Cai's face, and he turned sharply to glare at his uncle, though the redness in his ears betrayed him. "I have no idea what you're talking about," he muttered, but the words sounded weak even to his own ears.

Lucien just laughed, clapping him on the back again. At least, this time he didn't almost fall over. "Sure you don't, kid. Sure you don't."

Yep. He was in more trouble than he had expected. However, Uncle Lucien was not done with him yet.

He leaned closer. "So, what's the plan, Romeo? You gonna serenade her next? Maybe bust out a guitar and write her a love song?"

Cai shot him a flat look. "I don't even own a guitar."

"Oh, right. You're more the grand gesture type. What's it gonna be—a skywriting proposal? Or are you going to drag her out to a field of flowers and confess under a meteor shower and amidst a swarm of bees?"

"Are you done?" Cai asked, deadpan, though he knew he'd already thought of those things for something to do... but far off in the future.

"Not even close," Lucien said cheerfully, crossing his arms as if settling in for the long haul. "You're practically radiating 'sappy romance protagonist' energy right now, kid. I wouldn't be surprised if you've already picked out her wedding ring in your head."

Cai groaned, dragging a hand down his face. "You're impossible."

"I'm fun," Lucien corrected, clapping him on the back again. "And you? You're whipped. Admit it."

"I'm not—" Cai started, but Lucien cut him off with a raised hand.

"Don't even try to deny it. You're standing here with that stupid look on your face, staring at her like she's the sun and you're a sad little planet in her orbit."

Cai sputtered, trying to come up with a retort, but Lucien didn't give him a chance. "You know, I don't think I've ever seen you look this dumb over a girl," Lucien added with a mock wondering look. "Usually, you've got that whole 'can't be bothered; thing going on. But her? She's got you looking like a lovesick puppy."

"Can we talk about literally anything else?" Cai muttered, but there was no real heat in his voice.

Lucien grinned. "Sure thing, kiddo. Let's talk about how you're going to help her adapt to the family. Oh, wait. You don't have to—because she's already introduced herself. And you're just standing here gawking while she's over there charming everyone without even trying."

Cai glanced toward Lily, who was now laughing at something his Mom was saying while Aranya was still nestled contentedly in her arms, her tiny hand gripping Lily's finger.

Lucien's voice broke through his thoughts. "You're lucky, you little rascal. You've got a keeper so soon. And from the way she's fitting in, you seem to already know it."

Cai frowned, his gaze shifting back to Lucien. "How can you tell? You've barely spent any time with her."

Lucien just shook his head, his grin softening into something more sincere. "Look around, kid. She's already one of us. And from the way you're looking at her, she's already yours too."

Cai blinked as Uncle Lucien finally walked off. But he made no move to go to her. In the few minutes, it had taken to handle the kids and follow Lily into the home, she had somehow fitted into his family... How was something like that even possible?

Chapter 854: You Jerk

As Lily carefully placed little Aranya into her crib, she allowed herself a moment to exhale and take it all in, now that she was finally alone. Cai had warned her—his family could be overwhelming.

But even his warning hadn't quite prepared her for the whirlwind she'd been thrown into the moment she stepped over the threshold. The Frosts were quite a bunch. They threw hugs around like Christmas confetti, spoke loudly and, more often than not, over each other. Their cross-conversations were so dizzying that she'd felt cross-eyed more than once, trying to keep up with everything. And yet, not for a moment, had she been felt out of place or a stranger to them. They asked her questions, yes, but it did not feel like an interrogation.

And then, there were the similarities. Good Lord, what mould had God used to create the males in this family? The older generation, (though calling them old was a 'SIN'), was practically carbon copies of each other, with only slight variations if at all—a different hairstyle here, a sharper jawline there, perhaps a slightly different eye shape or color. Yep. She'd noticed all that because she was trying to keep them straight and remember who who was who. Not that it helped much—she was still hopelessly muddled.

Cai himself was a miniature replica of his father and uncle, and Vinny(the second oldest as the boy had proudly proclaimed)—looked like an even younger version of Cai. For a moment, she'd even been transported back to when she was a little girl and Cai used to come over.

It was as if the Frost family had discovered a secret cloning machine generations ago and were quietly keeping it under wraps. Even the toddlers who were running about were tiny Frosts in the making with little features that they'd inherited from their respective mother but overall their features were unmistakably stamped with the Frost's distinctive traits.

All her thoughts were scattered when suddenly Aranya stirred in her crib, wrinkling her little nose in protest as she had been put down. This little one was too cute and had already stolen her heart. But nothing had quite prepared her for the jolt she'd felt when she first laid eyes on Aranya. The moment the baby had been placed in her arms—without warning, mind you—her heart had nearly stopped.

For a split second, she'd been terrified she might drop the little girl. And then she'd gotten a good look at her face. This little angel could easily be mistaken for Cai's daughter!

Of course, it made sense. Their fathers were twins, their mothers biological sisters—it was only natural that the resemblance would be uncanny. Still, seeing it up close had been... surreal. It made her wonder what Cai's babies would look like...

Lily sighed and patted the little baby, until her frown disappeared and she seemed to settle back to sleep and sighed again. Because beneath all the chaos, the dizzying resemblances, and the sheer number of people, there was something deeply comforting, something Lily hadn't been expecting.

The Frossts had accepted her without hesitation, wrapping her in a warmth that felt as tangible as the hugs they so freely gave. There was a bond of love that wove through the family, binding them together, and now, by some miracle, she was a part of it. She could already feel it. She didn't know if Cai and her would survive a long future, but she would always cherish this time. It was no wonder that Cai was so giving and loving. His entire family was the same.

Her heart swelled as she adjusted the blanket over Aranya's tiny form. Overwhelming? Yes. Everything was overwhelming. But as she stood there, watching the little girl's chest rise and fall with each gentle breath, Lily couldn't help but feel grateful. Whatever chaos came with being a part of this family, it was worth it.

She'd barely taken a few steps outside the room when Cai blocked her path, almost scaring her.

She looked up at him with wide eyes and he hurriedly complained, "I can't believe you'd abandon me like that."

"Huh? What did I do?" She asked him in confusion. When did she abandon him?

"Of course you've been ignoring me. Showering all the attention on everyone else."

As he almost pouted, Lily could not help but giggle, "You jerk! I can't believe you're jealous of your own family."

"How can you not know that! They've all been taking your time. It is why I've come here now, so that I can take you away before you continue to ignore me. Come on, I'll show you my teenage self's room."

"But won't they notice if we go missing?"

"Nope. And if they do, they'll only tease me, so don't worry. Come on. Don't tell me you're not curious."

Before she could object, he caught her hand and escorted her towards a room further down the hall.

He opened the door with a flourish and as she stepped into the room, she could not help but look around curiously. There were all his trophies and certificates hanging on one side of the wall over a desk where he probably studied. In the middle of the room was a single person bed and over the wall against it were pictures. She walked forward, her gaze stuck on a single picture against the wall. It was her.. Okay, it was her, Jasmine and him... but still.

As she stood staring at it, he walked from behind her, his arms coming around her as he hugged her from behind. "Oops. I never knew you'd invaded my bedroom so much earlier."

He placed his chin on her shoulder, and she could not help but lean back against him, "I thought we were here to see your room. Why are you hugging me?"

Cai grinned and turned his head, kissing her neck, "Well, I am a young boy with a girl I like, in my room. What do you think is going on in my head?"

Chapter 855: A Chance Meeting

No one, absolutely no one, would have ever imagined that His Highness Prince Rafael Ignis would fall in love with a woman who literally fell at his feet. Especially when she was dressed in an outfit that could easily be mistaken for something far more daring than it was intended to be. Granted, it wasn't her falling at his feet in the traditional sense, but in the most literal one where she was now almost lying on top of his shoes.

As she collided with a waiter hurrying by, her body crashing to the floor, he immediately bent down to help her up. That was when his gaze met hers, and he was caught off guard by the depth of her large, beautiful eyes. They were captivating. If not for the unmistakable irritation blazing in her gaze, he might have foolishly wondered if she were some sort of fallen angel sent to upend his carefully structured world. The thought made him pause. When had his mind started conjuring such ridiculous, almost fantastical ideas? He inwardly scoffed at himself. Clearly, something was wrong with his head. Might have something to do with all the couples around him these days.

Before his security personnel could step forward to escort her away, their instincts on high alert, he raised a hand to signal them to hold back. There was no need for unnecessary commotion. Instead, he

turned his attention back to the woman. With a flicker of amusement that he worked hard to suppress, he noticed the remnants of her mishap—as she pulled the salad leaves out of her hair.

Without thinking things through, he reached out and pulled a few leaves out himself. She stared at his extended hand, her expression unreadable for a moment. Then, after a slight hesitation, she took it. With a soft, almost embarrassed murmur of thanks, she managed to steady herself. Her eyes flickered to the waiter who was now profusely apologizing, his face flushed with embarrassment.

Rafael braced himself. Girls like here were not really known to be polite to the staff and could create far less. And he would definitely need to make her step back if needed.

As she straightened up, he watched as her irritation turned to scowl. But then, something happened that had him frozen in place as she spoke fiercely, "Mister, you're hurt, and you're worrying about apologizing to me?"

The waiter froze, his face now ashen. She took a step closer, pointing at the red welt forming on his forearm, likely from where the tray had slipped. "I'm sure you didn't mean to pour that salad over me," she continued, her tone softening just enough to be reassuring. "So stop worrying about it and get some first aid before that bruise gets worse."

The waiter blinked, his mouth opening and closing like a fish gasping for air. Before he could find his words, the woman turned sharply and flagged another passing waiter. "You," she said briskly, pointing at him. "Take him to the kitchen and make sure he gets proper first aid. When you're done, I want you to report back and let me know he's doing okay. Understood?"

The second waiter nodded, clearly startled but quick to obey. He took the injured waiter by the arm and guided him away, the first still stammering a quiet, "Thank you, miss," as he disappeared through the doorway.

Rafael stood rooted to the spot, thoroughly shocked by what he had just witnessed. The ease with which she had taken control of the situation—and her unexpected grace in handling it—caught him entirely off guard. Where he had expected drama, there was poise. Where he had anticipated entitlement, there was kindness. He found himself studying her anew, his earlier thoughts about fallen angels stirring again in his mind.

Before he could recover or find words to talk to her, she turned her attention back to him. Her gaze flicked over him briefly and then instead of greeting him as he would expect, she gave him a curt nod and then spun on her heel and strode off toward the direction of the private rooms without so much as a backward glance.

Rafael watched her go, his lips twitching with the hint of a smile. This woman, whoever she was, had just managed to intrigue him in a way no one else had in years. Rafael's gaze lingered on the woman that was walking away and he found it difficult to even move his gaze away. He didn't know what it was that captured his attention- the striking line of her bare long legs or the way she held her head high, as though daring the world to challenge her, that captured his attention most.

As she disappeared through the door leading to the private rooms, Rafael realized he was still watching, his lips curving into a bemused smile. He gestured towards his security and the man quickly followed behind her. Of course, anyone who served Rafael knew what the man wanted. Information.

Rafael glanced down at his watch, noting the time. He knew that Cai must have already arrived by now and was likely waiting for him in the private room. Normally, Rafael would have made it a point to be punctual; he prided himself on it, in fact. But at that moment, the urgency of meeting Cai could wait just a little longer.

Somehow, he just knew that this woman was going to be his future. However, his anticipation turned to disappointment when the personnel returned with no information, "Sorry, sir. She disappeared."

"What do you mean she disappeared?" he asked in confusion.

The man shifted uncomfortably, clearly unaccustomed to delivering disappointing news. "She turned the corner, Your Highness, but by the time I followed, the hallway was empty. There was no sign of her anywhere."

Rafael stared at him, the words not quite registering at first. How could someone vanish so quickly in a place like this? It was almost absurd. For a brief, irrational moment, his mind flitted back to the fleeting thought he'd had earlier—that she might be some kind of angel or ethereal being.

But then he sighed. A sense of disappointment settled over him, heavier than he would have expected from such a short meeting. Some things were just not fated. If he was meant to meet her again, he would.

Chapter 856: Blazing anger

Rafael had resigned himself to the fact that he was probably not meant to get to know the girl. Fate, it seemed, had other plans, and he was determined to accept that gracefully—or so he thought. But as he stepped into the private room, all notions of calm acceptance shattered like glass.

The beautiful angel, the one who had captured his thoughts so effortlessly, was right there. But she wasn't alone. She was in the arms of his best friend—his very engaged and supposedly in love best friend!

The sight hit him like a punch to the gut, and his chest burned with an emotion he refused to name. Narrowing his eyes, Rafael quickly convinced himself that his next actions were driven purely by honor and not blind jealousy. His legs moved before his mind could catch up, carrying him forward in swift, purposeful strides. Without so much as a greeting, he grabbed the girl by the arm, yanking her away from Caius. Then, without hesitation, Rafael swung his fist, fully intending to plant it squarely on Cai's jaw.

Only Cai's quick reflexes saved him. The man ducked just in time, leaving Rafael's fist to swing through empty air.

"Woah! Rafael Ignis! What is wrong with you?" Caius demanded, straightening up and throwing his hands in the air, wide-eyed and incredulous over the sudden violent act by his friend. Just for safety, Cai took a few steps back, wondering if Rafe had lost his mind or something.

"Wrong with me? What's wrong with you, Caius Frost?" Rafael shot back, his voice sharp with accusation. "I thought you were an honorable man! A loyal man! And yet here you are, doing... this! Cheating on Lily! Stand still and let me punch some sense back into you!"

Rafael's heated words echoed in the room, his hands balled into fists as he glared at Cai. He was fully prepared for another round of confrontation when a sound stopped him cold. A melodic laugh—a laugh so light and unbothered that it grated on his already frayed nerves.

He turned sharply toward the source, his eyes narrowing as they landed on the woman. The angel. She was laughing—laughing!—as if this entire situation was a joke. Her radiant smile softened her features, and for a brief moment, Rafael's heart stumbled again. But the irritation that coursed through him quickly shoved aside the effect her beauty had on him.

So this was who she truly was? A woman who found humor in wrecking relationships and betraying trust? He had thought her kind. Thought her good. Clearly, he'd been wrong.

She must have felt his accusing gaze because she stopped laughing, her lips twitching as she tilted her head and assessed him in return. The once-over she gave him made his irritation spike further, but before he could speak, Cai groaned loudly and rolled his eyes.

"Seriously, Rafe? Seriously? I thought we were good friends by now! But this?" Cai gestured between himself and the girl, his expression half-annoyed, half-bemused. "You think this is who I am? That I'd cheat on Lily? And not just that, but do it so openly? As if I'd invite a woman here—at a meeting scheduled with you, of all people—to make it easier to catch me in the act? How stupid do you think I am?"

Rafael blinked, momentarily stunned. Cai did have a point. The situation was a little too ridiculous when framed that way. Cai would not cheat. And if he did, why would he do it in a way that he would get caught?

But before he could dwell much on Cai's explanation, the woman moved again. She stepped closer to Caius and placed a hand on his shoulder, sending a fresh wave of red-hot jealousy rushing through Rafael. What was she doing now? Why did she insist on being so close to Cai? He gritted his teeth, his fingers twitching at his side.

Then she spoke. Her words were calm, precise, as if she were talking about the weather. "If you ever cheat on my sister-in-law, I will cut you into little pieces and feed you to the crows."

Rafe went still. It took a moment for him to fully process her words. Sister-in-law?

If she referred to Lily as her sister in law then she had to be Cai's... sister. He frowned. But wasn't his sister fourteen or fifteen? He gave the girl another look. Holy shi*! Had he almost lusted after a child? That thought was even more horrifying that he almost knocked his own self out.

Thankfully, Cai seemed to not take the threat seriously as he said, "As if I can bear to look at any woman other than Lily."

Rafael stared at the pair, trying to make sense of the confusing emotions coursing through him when Cai's phone suddenly rang. "It's the hospital. One of my patients has taken a downturn."

"I've got to head out," he said briskly, already grabbing his coat. "Duty calls. But before I leave..." He gestured between the three of them with a hand. "Let's clear up this mess, shall we?"

"Rafe," Cai began, clapping a hand on his shoulder, "this is Arabelle. My honorary sister. A constant pain in my neck and the resident troublemaker of the Frost family. Don't let her innocent face fool you."

"And Arabelle, this is His Highness, Crown Prince Rafael Ignis. You might want to tone down the sass; he's royalty."

Arabelle shrugged at that, winking at Cai, "I've never let royalty bother me in the past, have I? In fact, I am known for bothering those with titles...case in point- Dora..."

Cai rolled his eyes at that. There was no refuting the truth and shook his head hurriedly, "Just tone it down, okay? And I called you both heretogether because I am short on time. I believed that the two of you might be interested in a collaboration but now that I have to leave, go ahead and discuss this amongst yourselves, okay? I'll see you both later."

Chapter 857: A Collaboration of What?

An uncomfortable silence settled over the room as Rafael and Arabelle regarded each other while Cai went on his merry way. Rafe was still trying to process everything—her boldness, her connection to Cai, and the undeniable spark of intrigue she stirred in him. Now that they had been introduced, Rafe could vaguely remember what he knew of the Frost Family. She was one of the sisters in law of the Frost brother, if he was not mistaken...Gabe's? He wasn't sure though so he said nothing. He was simply relieved that she was no little girl.

Arabelle broke the silence first, cocking her head with a sly smile. "Are you in shock about your good intentions going to waste? But don't worry. I like you."

Rafale blinked. She liked him? He almost blurted out that he liked her too but before he could make that faux pas, he was saved since she continued, "I mean I already liked you for all the work you've been doing to help relocate victims of human trafficking but that could always be considered political agenda. But now I know you have integrity since you wanted to punch your best friend if he was cheating."

Rafe decided to play it safe. He was pretty sure that his IQ had somehow fallen in the last few minutes because he simply seemed to be unable to understand what she was saying. All he wanted to do was smile and stare at this beauty.

So, gathering his thoughts, he asked tentatively, "What kind of collaboration?"

And then the girl grinned and shrugged, "Collaboration? I have no idea. Unless that is Cai's sly way of arranging a blind date for us? I mean he is over the moon in a relationship so maybe he wants to see his best friend and honorary sister in a happy relationship too?"

Rafael blinked, caught off guard by her suggestion of a relationship and almost shouted, "Hell yeah." He was on board with the idea of dating this fine woman. A date with her would certainly be... unconventional. Before he could explore that line of thought, however, Arabelle shattered his bubble.

"Your expression looks so funny since I made the suggestion." As Arabelle leaned against the table, her hands on each side of her, she grinned and continued, "Relax. I think by collaboration he really did mean that. The thing is, I've been pestering him to help me put together a fund raiser and some other things. I'm an activist for Global Centurion."

The name sounded vaguely familiar to Rafael, but he didn't interrupt, curious to hear more of her voice.

Global Centurion is an organization dedicated to fighting human trafficking. We work to combat it on all fronts—awareness campaigns, survivor support, policy advocacy, and holding traffickers accountable. It's a constant uphill battle, but it's worth every ounce of effort. However, it is also an expensive battle and we need more funds all the time. Hence the fund raiser."

"Alright," he said casually, as if they were discussing dinner plans instead of a large scale fund raiser. "How about four months from now? I'm sure there's a weekend around that time when my schedule clears up. Until then, feel free to coordinate with my assistant for anything you might need. You'll have plenty of time to prepare."

Arabelle blinked, momentarily thrown off by his immediate agreement. Just like that? No pushback, no questions, no hesitation? She had been ready for a challenge—had even prepared an entire pitch in her head, complete with carefully crafted arguments and strategically flattering comments about his past initiatives. She had expected him to need convincing, maybe even cajoling, and now... nothing? He'd simply agreed?

Her mouth opened slightly, then closed again, words momentarily failing her as she processed his response.

"I—" she started, then stopped, narrowing her eyes at him suspiciously. "Wait a second. That's it? You're just... agreeing?"

Rafael tilted his head, his smile widening "What were you expecting? A long-winded debate? A detailed negotiation?" He leaned forward, closer to her now, almost in her space as he lowered his voice, "I'm not an unreasonable man, Arabelle. If you've come to me, I am sure you must have made a compelling case. But I happen to agree with your cause so no need to fight it."

Arabelle nodded then. Okay, so this was totally unsurprising. This guy was not a jer*. He was not going to make her grovel and beg or argue... That was a... relief.

"Alright then. Thank you for your collaboration. I'll get in touch with your assistant regarding the details..."

He leaned forward then, closing the distance between them. His hands came to rest on the edge of the table she was leaning against, caging Arabelle in. She straightened slightly at that as his face hovered just inches from hers.

"Now," he murmured, "let's move on to something far more important."

Arabelle blinked, her lips parting slightly in surprise as the air between them grew taut with unspoken tension. For a moment, she forgot to breathe, lost in the intensity of his gaze. Her fingers gripped the table's edge, and despite herself, her eyes fluttered half-closed, anticipation threading through her veins.

Was he going to kiss her?

But just as the thought fully formed, Rafael straightened abruptly, a smile tugging at his lips. He reached to the side and handed her a leather-bound menu, breaking the spell with disarming ease.

"Let's order dinner," he said.

Arabelle blinked again, the abrupt shift leaving her momentarily speechless. She took the menu automatically, her fingers brushing against his as she did. The contact sent a small jolt through her, and she was acutely aware of the smirk that lingered on his face.

"Dinner," she repeated, her voice a touch breathless. She quickly cleared her throat, willing herself to regain composure. "Right. Of course. Dinner."

As Rafael stepped back to his seat, his satisfied grin didn't falter. He'd just needed to make sure if he was the only one feeling the magnetic pull. And he now knew, he wasn't. She was attracted to him as well.

Chapter 858: Rafe's Interest

As she stared at His Highness Prince Rafael Ignis, she understood exactly what Dora and Cai meant when they talked about the instant attraction thing. Holy hell. It was like she was a candle, and Rafe was the matchstick, striking her alight with even a fleeting touch.

The briefest brush of their hands had left her shaken, her nerves tingling like live wires. Her body was hyper-aware of his proximity, her mind a chaotic mess of thoughts she didn't want to entertain. Bloody hell! Who carried that kind of magnetism, that ability to command attention and set hearts racing? It was practically unfair. How was it that random women weren't sticking to him like magnets every time he walked into a room?

But Arabelle wasn't about to fall into that same trap. Nope. She had more sense than that, or so she told herself. Sure, Dora and Cai had been swept off their feet by this whole "instant attraction" nonsense, but Arabelle had things to do—important things that didn't involve mooning over some impossibly attractive prince with a smug grin.

She had goals, responsibilities, and not a single one of them involved losing her head over someone like him. Especially not a royal. Getting tangled up in that kind of drama was the last thing she needed.

And yet, it wasn't easy to ignore him. That maddening smug smile of his made her blood simmer, not because it was charming, but because of the sheer arrogance behind it. Oh, he knew how good he looked. That much was obvious. The way he carried himself, the way his lips quirked in amusement—it all screamed, I know I'm irresistible, and I am enjoying watching you try to resist me. It was infuriating. Men like him didn't even have to try. They were used to women falling at their feet, batting their lashes, and throwing caution—and better judgment—to the wind.

No, thank you. Arabelle had no intention of being another name on his undoubtedly long list of admirers. Sure, he looked like he could sweep someone off their feet with a single look, but she bet he wasn't even a good lover. Arrogance like that rarely came with the effort to back it up. He was probably the type who relied entirely on his looks, expecting them to do all the work for him.

She could practically feel her blood pressure rising as she mulled over it. No, she decided firmly, she was not about to let some royal heartthrob, no matter how ridiculously attractive, derail her plans. If Rafe thought she was going to fall at his feet like everyone else, he was in for a rude awakening.

Now that she had already secured his agreement, she would eat a polite dinner with him and then she would definitely make her escape.

"Lost in thought?" Rafe's voice pulled her back to reality and she blinked, realizing she'd been staring at the menu in front of her while her mind wandered over other things...

Before she could respond, he extended a glass to her, "Try this. One of the finest blends from Petrovia's Royal collection."

She hesitated for a fraction of a second before accepting it and clinking her glass against his. They could enjoy a drink without her being too distracted. Without a thought she brought it to her lips, but before she could drink, she stilled. Carefully, she sniffed the drink and her lips tightened.

The drink was spiked. This was not what she had expected. The reason for smelling the drink had been a force of habit. When she'd taken self defence classes, there had been an added class about how to

identify drugs or polysubstances in drinks. Carefully, she placed the glass back on the table, while dipping her index finger in the liquid.

As expected, the drink reacted to the metal on her nail extension and changed colour slight. Enough to confirm her suspicions.

Her gaze snapped up, anger sparking in her chest as she turned to Rafe. But before she could say a word, her sharp observation caught him raising his own glass. Her breath hitched as she watched him take a long, casual sip.

Realization struck her like a thunderbolt. He didn't know.

The fury that had been building in her chest morphed into something else—confusion and alarm. If he wasn't aware, then someone else had tampered with the drinks. But why? And who?

"Is something wrong?" Rafe asked, lowering his glass and raising a brow at her frozen posture. His tone was light, almost teasing, but the faint crease of concern on his forehead suggested he'd noticed her hesitation.

Arabelle's hand shot out, wrapping firmly around Rafe's wrist just as he was about to take another sip. His eyes widened, the faintest hint of surprise flickering across his face.

"You don't want to do that," she said, her voice low but steady, her gaze locking onto his. Without waiting for his reaction, she plucked the glass from his hand and stood up, the chair scraping lightly against the floor.

"Excuse me?" he asked.

Arabelle ignored him. Holding the glass carefully, she brought it to her nose and sniffed. The same sharp, chemical tang assaulted her senses, confirming her worst fears. Her expression darkened, and without hesitation, she turned and tipped the contents into the potted plant beside their table.

"What the hell are you doing?" he asked curiously.

Arabelle placed the empty glass on the table deliberately and turned to face him, "Saving your life, apparently."

He frowned, "What do you mean?"

But before he could say more, she grabbed the bottle with the rest of the drink, grabbed his tie and caught his lips in a fiery kiss.

Rafe barely had a moment to process the kiss before Arabelle broke it off, her eyes blazing. She still held his tie, using it to pull him toward her as she stepped out of the private dining room.

"Arabelle, what—" he started, but she cut him off with a sharp glance.

"Shut up and move and pretend to be in lust or something," she snapped, dragging him along with surprising strength for her slender frame.

Chapter 859: Compromised

Once they stepped outside, she wasted no time steering him toward her car— parked conveniently close to the back entrance. If this girl had not been introduced to him by Cai, he would have thought that this was some kind of a kidnapping attempt. However, he let her take him away for some reason that he could not name.

Her hand lingered lightly on his arm as they walked, her pace steady but purposeful. Just as they neared the car, she leaned closer, her voice dropping to a sultry whisper that sent a jolt down his spine.

"Push me against the car like you can't keep your hands to yourself," she murmured, her breath brushing his ear. "Then get into the car."

The request was as unexpected as it was provocative. A girl he was undeniably attracted to had just given him permission—no, commanded him—to press her against the car and kiss her like they were the leads in some intense, romantic drama. Despite the absurdity of the situation, there was no way he was about to say no.

When they reached the car, he didn't hesitate. His hands found her waist with ease, pulling her firmly against him before spinning her and pushing her against the car.

The world around them seemed to blur as his lips captured hers with a mixture of fervor and restraint that belied his growing attraction. The kiss was electric, a collision of heat and urgency, and he could feel her smile against his lips, as if she'd expected nothing less. For a moment she kissed him back but then the car was unlocked with a sharp click as she pressed a button on her key fob without breaking the kiss.

When she finally pulled away, she stepped to the side and opened the passenger door, gesturing for him to get in.

"Arabelle—"

"Rafe, get in the damn car," she interrupted, her eyes locked onto his with an intensity that silenced him. "Now."

For once in his life, Rafael decided not to argue and follow his impulse. He slid into the passenger seat, though his expression remained one of incredulity. Arabelle shut the door behind him with more force than necessary before rounding the car and climbing into the driver's seat.

As she started the engine, she cast a glance at him, her tone softer but no less urgent. "Put your seatbelt on. You've been compromised, Your Highness, and I'm not sticking around to see what happens next."

He did as she said, watching her warily. "Are you going to tell me what the hell is going on?"

She sighed, her hands gripping the steering wheel tightly as she pulled out onto the road. "Someone tampered with the drinks. Yours and mine."

His jaw tightened. "You're certain?"

"Positive," she said grimly. "And if you don't believe me, you're welcome to ask the potted plant back there how it's feeling right now."

"I didn't realize you were this... dramatic."

She shot him a glare. "This isn't a joke, Rafe. If you didn't know about the tampering, then someone's targeting you. And if they're targeting you, they're not going to stop at one failed attempt."

Her words hit him like a bucket of ice water. He leaned back in his seat, his mind racing. "Who would—It could be you they are targetting..."

Arabelle shook her head. "Impossible. The bottle was there when I entered the room. Which meant either it had been ordered by Cai or been sent here. We'll know that once we talk to Cai. But anyone who knows Cai will be well aware that he won't touch alcohol unless it was a momentous occasion since it would compromise with his reflexes."

"So, if he is not the target then it is you or me. No one other than Cai knew that I would be joining you guys so the obvious target was you. You also seem to like this blend which meant that the person was probably aware of your preferences. Are you feeling alright? Any tingling sensations or numbing? You did take a couple of sips..."

Rafe ran a hand through his hair, wariness flickering across his face. "I feel fine," he said, his voice even, though his eyes betrayed a hint of doubt. "No tingling, no numbness, no dizziness. Whatever it was, it didn't have enough time to do anything—or it wasn't a strong dose."

Arabelle cast him a quick glance, her lips pressing into a firm line as she navigated the quiet streets. "That's a relief, but we can't take any chances. You're coming with me, and we're figuring this out."

He raised an eyebrow, leaning slightly toward her. "I'm coming with you? To where, exactly?"

Her hands tightened on the wheel, and she shot him a brief, pointed look. "I don't need your sass right now, Rafe. You can stay at my place tonight. It's safer than wherever you were planning to go."

The faintest smirk tugged at his lips, but he quickly smothered it. "So, you're inviting me over? Didn't peg you for the type to bring princes home on the first date."

"Call it what you want," she retorted dryly, not taking the bait. "But this isn't about you. It's about figuring out who spiked that drink and making sure you stay alive long enough to do something about it. You will need to make sure that your security team is not compromised. If they drugged you then they might have someone on the inside."

Rafe chuckled softly, though there was no humor in his voice. "You have a unique way of making a guy feel special. But you are right."

Arabelle nodded and questioned him, "Do you have someone you trust? Someone who can take the bottle and test it for whatever was added?"

His expression grew serious, and he nodded. "I do have a few people but this time, the only person I am going to trust is Kael."

"Good. Call him," she instructed. "We need that bottle analyzed as soon as possible. Whoever did this isn't going to stop with one attempt. And the sooner we know what they used, the better prepared we'll be."

Rafe retrieved his phone from his pocket, "I'll have Kael meet us somewhere to pick up the bottle."

Chapter 860: A Regular Expert

As Arabelle drove, her eyes flicked to the rearview mirror every few seconds, tracking the headlights of a car that had been following them for blocks. Her jaw tightened, her grip firm on the steering wheel. The fact they were following was something to be assumed. But they were not even trying to hide it? That was dangerous.

"Someone's following us," she murmured in steadily.

Rafe turned slightly, his sharp gaze locking on the black sedan two cars back. "I know. Could be security—protocol if I leave with a woman. I informed them." She shot him a glance and he raised his hands, "I know there could be a mole but if I disappear without informing, they will know for sure that I am suspicious. For now, they are not too sure if I'm drugged or not."

"Also I know it could be someone else following us. But we should be fine for now. Whoever they are, they probably want me alive. Hence the drug and not poison." His voice was calm, but the edge in his

tone made her pulse quicken. And then he continued, "Two kilometers ahead, there's a pharmacy. You'll need to stop there."

"A pharmacy?" she asked, frowning. "Why?"

He smirked, his tone turning teasing. "Condoms."

Arabelle choked, darting him a sharp look before returning her focus to the road. "Seriously? Someone tampered with your drink, and that's what you're thinking about?"

"Relax," he said, amusement flickering in his expression. "It's an excuse. Kael's meeting me there to take the bottle. The condoms? Just a cover since I did leave with you. Besides, I always carry some."

Her hands gripped the wheel tighter, her cheeks heating. "Not touching that comment," she thought to herself, determined to stay focused.

He chuckled softly as if he could read her thoughts. "By the way, how do you know so much about recognizing drugs? And even escaping places? You can't be more than twenty-one or twenty-two."

"Twenty-three," she corrected, glancing his way. "And I live with a crazy guy who's overly protective of me."

Rafe stiffened at her words, his jaw tightening as an unfamiliar wave of jealousy surged through him. Living with a guy? The thought irritated him more than it should, sparking the irrational urge to punch someone.

Arabelle, oblivious to his reaction, focused on the road. "We're almost there. Try not to take too long with your little... errand."

He smirked, shaking off his thoughts. "Efficiency is one of my many talents."

Moments later, she pulled into the pharmacy parking lot, her gaze flicking to the rearview mirror to confirm the black sedan had followed and drove ahead. That was good for now. Even if someone else came to follow them or observe them, it would take time.

Rafe grabbed the tampered drink bottle and climbed out, his movements as casual as ever, as he hid the bottle in his jacket. "Stay here. Kael's inside. I'll handle this."

Arabelle watched him walk into the pharmacy, without any fear. Minutes later, he returned, tossing a small box in the middle of their seats as he slid into the passenger seat.

"Subtle," she quipped, starting the engine.

"Effective," he countered smoothly, buckling his seatbelt. "We'll have news in another hour or two."

Finally, she pulled into an underground parking garage beneath her building, the space dimly lit and deserted. But before she could get off, he stopped her. Leaning over, he caught her lips in a quick and searing kiss. She raised her hand to push him away but instead he caught her wrist and held it against the window.

She'd never known kissing could be like this. None of her previous partners had done this. The hand that held her wrist moved so that their fingers were interlocked. And then, slowly he broke the kiss, for a second only. Before taking her lips again. And then, the kiss turned deeper somehow, his other hand moving over her body slowly. The more he kissed, the more his hand explored, moving over her hips, her waist. She arched into him as he touched her breasts before finally gathering the courage to break their kiss.

She should've been furious, but the heat rushing through her veins made it hard to summon any anger.

"That wasn't part of the plan," she said breathlessly, her voice sharp despite the traitorous quiver in it.

He smirked, his thumb brushing lightly against her wrist before letting her go. "Just testing a theory."

"A theory?" she snapped, trying to keep her tone steady as she sat back, smoothing her hair as if it would help regain her composure. "What theory?"

"That you'd stop me if you really didn't want it." His voice was low, almost a whisper, but the confidence in it made her blood boil. "You see, despite the danger we are in, we have to pretend that we are going to be fucking each other in a few minutes. That means, I should not be able to keep me hands to myself." He paused and slowly moved away from her, "But I doubt I will be able to stop myself if we were to start..."

Her cheeks burned as she glared at him. "You're insufferable, Your Highness. Let's move," she said, stepping out of the car.

Rafe followed her lead, keeping close as they made their way to the elevator. Inside, she pressed the button for her floor and leaned casually against the wall to stare at him, but using the excuse of them being followed, he leaned in and caught her lips again.

Unexpectedly, this time, her hands moved to his waist, spreading possessively on his lower back before she pulled him closer into her body, rubbing herself suggestively against him. He groaned and let her feel what she did to him before breaking the kiss as the elevator stopped. It was only the sound of the elevator door opening that stopped him from getting rid of her clothes as he realized that they were in public.