**Title: Unspoken love**

*Genre: romance, drama*

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**Chapter 1: The Wedding**

Mia felt the soft hum of the wedding music in the air, a sweet melody that seemed to mock the knot tightening in her chest. She tried to push aside the sense of unease, but it lingered, like a shadow that refused to leave her side. She glanced around, her eyes scanning the ornate decorations—soft pink roses draped over the tables, delicate chandeliers hanging from the ceiling, and the flickering candlelight casting a romantic glow. It was meant to be a celebration of love, but all Mia could feel was the weight of her past.

She hadn’t planned to be here. She hadn’t planned to see *him*—not like this. Jason.

But there he was, standing near the bar, talking with a group of old classmates. His presence hit her like a wave, a force that knocked her breathless, leaving her struggling to maintain her composure. It had been three years since they broke up. Three long years, and yet every time their paths crossed, the old wound seemed to reopen, raw and fresh.

Mia’s gaze lingered on him, his tousled brown hair and those familiar blue eyes that had once looked at her with so much affection, now veiled with indifference, as if the years between them had erased everything they’d shared. But Mia knew better. His posture, the way his jaw clenched as he laughed, even the slight furrow of his brow—there was something unresolved in the air between them. Something unsaid.

Mia couldn’t tear her eyes away. She hadn’t seen him in months, and her heart betrayed her, thumping in her chest like a frantic drumbeat. She’d thought she was over him, but the truth was harder to face.

The wedding had come and gone. The vows were exchanged, the cake cut, and the newlyweds had danced. Mia had gone through the motions, pretending to smile, pretending to be happy for her classmate, but her thoughts kept drifting back to Jason. Was he happy? Was he over her? Or did he feel the same pull she did—the pull that always seemed to draw them together, no matter how many miles they put between themselves?

As if on cue, Jason’s eyes found hers from across the room. His gaze locked with hers, and time seemed to stretch out, stretching between them like an invisible thread pulling them closer. Mia’s stomach tightened, and she forced herself to look away. She couldn’t do this—not here, not now.

But it was too late.

Jason’s footsteps drew nearer, each one steady and deliberate, and before Mia could make her escape, he was standing in front of her, the scent of his cologne—something woodsy and familiar—filling her senses. He wore a soft smile, the kind that had once been reserved just for her. She stiffened, unsure whether to return the gesture or hide the emotions that threatened to spill out.

“Mia,” he said, his voice warm, though there was a flicker of uncertainty in his eyes.

“Jason.” The word came out clipped, too short, too strained. She swallowed, forcing a calm that didn’t exist. “I didn’t expect to see you here.”

He chuckled softly, scratching the back of his neck in that nervous way he always did. “I guess we’re both full of surprises tonight.” His smile faltered as he glanced at the glass in her hand. “Are you enjoying yourself?”

Mia’s eyes flitted over his shoulder, the place where his girlfriend, Cassie, stood talking to a group of their old friends. Mia tried not to glance too long at her—tried to block out the image of Cassie’s blonde hair, the way she laughed as though she had no cares in the world. Jason’s life had moved on, but Mia was still stuck in a past she couldn’t quite escape.

“I’m fine,” Mia replied, her voice barely above a whisper. “Just... catching up with people.”

Jason’s gaze shifted, searching her face as though he could read every thought she was hiding. He stepped closer, a subtle shift that closed the gap between them. For a moment, it felt like no time had passed at all. They were the same. They were *them* again, the couple who had once been inseparable, whose love had burned with intensity—until it didn’t.

Mia had never expected the pain to come back this way—quiet, almost like a whisper, but still as sharp as it had been when he left her. She wanted to walk away, to retreat into the safety of the crowd and forget everything. But she couldn’t. Jason had a way of pulling her in, even now.

“So,” Jason began, his voice low and hesitant. “How have you been?”

Mia forced a smile, one that didn’t reach her eyes. “I’ve been good. Life has a way of moving on, doesn’t it?”

He nodded, his gaze dropping to his shoes for a brief moment. When he looked up again, the smile on his face seemed a little sadder, a little more fragile. “I heard you’re seeing someone,” he said, his tone lighter than before, but there was a flicker of something underneath it—a tinge of jealousy, perhaps, or regret. “That’s great. Really. I’m happy for you.”

Mia paused. She hadn’t expected him to bring up Victor, but she supposed it was inevitable. “Yeah. His name’s Victor. He’s been really good to me.”

Jason’s lips twitched into a tight smile. “I’m glad you’ve found someone who makes you happy.”

She stared at him, trying to read him, to figure out what was behind that distant expression. Was it guilt? Or was it something deeper? The air between them crackled, charged with the weight of everything they’d never said, everything that had remained unresolved.

Mia took a deep breath, pulling herself together. “Jason, I should go.” She didn’t know if she was running from him, or from herself. But it didn’t matter. She had to leave.

“Wait.” Jason’s hand shot out, gently but firmly gripping her wrist. “Mia, I—I didn’t want it to end like this.”

Her breath caught in her throat. She tried to pull away, but his grip tightened just enough to keep her from escaping.

“You hurt me,” she said quietly, her voice barely audible above the wedding music. “You broke me, Jason. I’m still trying to fix myself.”

His face twisted in pain, but Mia didn’t let herself soften. She couldn’t. Not now.

“I didn’t mean to. You have to believe that,” Jason pleaded, his voice tight with emotion.

But Mia shook her head. She couldn’t afford to fall back into that old trap. She had come so far—too far to let him back in now. “Goodbye, Jason,” she said firmly, yanking her wrist free from his grasp.

And before he could say another word, Mia turned and walked away, leaving the past—and him—behind her.

**Chapter 2: The Present Moment**

Mia sat at her kitchen table, her phone vibrating in front of her. The series of text messages from Jason had become a constant since that night at the wedding. Her stomach churned every time she saw his name, but she couldn’t bring herself to block him. Maybe it was the history, maybe it was the lingering hope that one day, things could be different. But as each message popped up on her screen, she felt herself growing more and more frustrated.

*Why is he doing this?* Mia thought, staring at the phone as if willing it to stop vibrating.

The text messages were becoming persistent. "I’m sorry. Please, Mia. Can we talk?" one message read. Another followed soon after. "I’m not asking for anything, I just need you to know how much you meant to me. Please, let me explain."

Her fingers hovered over the screen, the temptation to respond strong, but Mia knew that any response would only pull her back into that same endless loop of pain. It had been three years since they broke up, and Jason’s messages now felt like a cruel reminder of a time she had been desperate to forget. A time when she had believed in their love, only for it to be shattered by his absence.

Victor had been a constant presence in her life for the last year, supportive and caring. She had tried to move on, she had *moved on*. She had given him her heart, and she didn’t want Jason coming back into her life to complicate things again.

Mia sighed and put the phone down, pushing it away. It was time to stop thinking about it. She had told Jason, she had made herself clear. The past had to remain the past.

But as if the universe had a twisted sense of humor, the phone buzzed again. This time, it wasn’t a text message. It was a call.

Mia froze.

*No. Not this again.*

Her thumb hovered over the screen, hesitating. She could feel the weight of the decision pressing on her chest. She wanted to ignore it, to let it go straight to voicemail. She wanted to keep moving forward without any more interruptions. But there was something about Jason’s voice, something she hadn’t been able to escape for years.

With a shaky breath, Mia finally answered.

“Hello?”

There was a pause on the other end before Jason’s voice broke through the static. “Mia…” he said, and she could hear the raw emotion in his voice, the desperation.

“What is it, Jason?” Mia said, trying to keep her voice steady. “I told you already. It’s over. Please, stop calling me.”

“I know, I know,” Jason replied quickly, his voice cracking. “I’m not trying to get back together. I just... I just need to talk to you. I owe you that much.”

Mia closed her eyes, her hand gripping the edge of the table. She had to stay strong. She had to keep her resolve. “What could we possibly talk about, Jason? It’s been three years. It’s over.”

“I never stopped loving you, Mia,” Jason said, his words catching in his throat. “I’ve always regretted how things ended, how I just... left. And now I’m finally realizing how much I hurt you, and I... I just need to make it right.”

Mia felt her heart twist painfully, but she didn’t let it show. “You don’t get to come back into my life now and fix everything, Jason. You had your chance. You broke me, and I can’t go back to that. I’ve moved on.”

Jason’s voice softened, almost pleading. “Mia, please... don’t do this. I know it’s been a long time, but I’m still here. I’m not asking for anything, I swear. I just want you to know how sorry I am. I need you to hear me out, just once.”

The sincerity in his voice was unmistakable. It pulled at something inside her, something that had been buried deep down, a small crack in the wall she had built around herself. She clenched her jaw, willing herself to stay strong.

“I’m with someone else now, Jason,” Mia said, her voice quiet but firm. “Victor has been there for me in ways you never were. He loves me, and I love him. I’m not going to let you mess that up.”

Jason was silent for a long moment. Mia could hear him breathing on the other end of the line. “I understand,” he finally said, his voice quiet. “I never wanted to hurt you. But I know now I’ve lost you for good.”

“You have,” Mia said softly, but with finality. “I’m sorry, Jason. I really am. But it’s over.”

There was another long silence before Jason spoke again, this time his voice resigned. “Goodbye, Mia.”

The line clicked off, and Mia sat there for a long time, staring at the phone in her hand. A mixture of relief and sadness washed over her. She had said what needed to be said. She had let go.

But for some reason, the weight of it all felt heavier now. She had closed the door on Jason, and yet, she couldn’t shake the feeling that something was still lingering.

Later that night, as Mia sat on the couch in her apartment, she felt the familiar ache in her chest. She tried to ignore it, focusing on the television in front of her. But the memories of Jason, of their time together, kept creeping into her mind.

It was hard to let go of someone who had been her everything for so long. Jason had been her first love, and no matter how much she had tried to move forward, part of her still carried him with her. It wasn’t fair to Victor, she knew that. He deserved all of her, without any hesitation, without any ghosts from the past.

But the truth was, Mia wasn’t sure if she could ever be fully free from Jason.

**Chapter 3: A Night With Victor, Thoughts of Jason**

The evening air was cool, and the streetlights flickered softly as Mia walked towards Victor’s apartment. She had promised him that she would be there, and despite everything swirling in her mind, she needed to keep that promise. After all, Victor had been nothing but patient and loving since they’d gotten together. He deserved her attention—*deserved her heart,* she reminded herself.

But tonight, something felt off. Mia’s mind was far from the warm dinner that awaited her. It was preoccupied by Jason. She couldn’t shake the thought of him, the echo of his voice, and the way he’d looked at her when they spoke on the phone earlier. There was so much left unresolved, so many questions that still lingered. And now, as she stood outside Victor’s door, ready to enter into the comforting warmth of his apartment, she realized that she couldn’t stop thinking about Jason.

The door opened, and Victor greeted her with a bright smile, his arms extending in a welcoming embrace. Mia smiled back weakly, letting him pull her into a hug. He kissed the top of her head, his hands lingering on her shoulders for a moment as he pulled back.

“Hey, you look great,” he said, his voice soft and affectionate.

Mia nodded, trying to mask the storm in her heart. "Thanks," she replied, though her smile didn’t quite reach her eyes. *Not tonight, Victor. Not tonight.*

Victor seemed to sense something was off, though he didn’t push it immediately. He had been with Mia long enough to know when something wasn’t right, but he also knew she would keep it to herself unless he pried. And he wasn’t about to do that, not tonight.

"Come on, dinner’s ready," he said, his voice cheerful as he took her hand and led her to the small dining table set up by the window. Soft candlelight flickered between them, and the rich scent of Italian pasta and garlic filled the room. But Mia wasn’t hungry. Not for the food, not for anything. Her stomach twisted with guilt.

She took a seat, her mind still far away. *What is wrong with me?* she thought, forcing herself to smile as Victor served her a plate of food. She wanted to be here with him. She wanted to enjoy this night. But no matter how hard she tried, her thoughts kept drifting back to Jason—his eyes, his words, his apology. She couldn’t get him out of her head.

Victor sat down across from her, eyeing her with concern as he picked up his fork. "You okay?" he asked gently, his voice soft but laced with worry. "You’re awfully quiet tonight. Is everything alright?"

Mia blinked, snapping out of her thoughts. She forced herself to focus on him. "Yeah, just a little tired, I guess. It’s been a long day," she said, hoping her excuse would suffice.

Victor didn’t buy it. He leaned forward, his brow furrowing slightly as he looked at her. "Mia," he said softly, his voice full of warmth and concern. "You’ve been like this for the past few days. Something’s wrong. If there’s something on your mind, you can talk to me."

Mia’s heart squeezed. She wanted to be honest with him. She really did. She didn’t want to hide behind lies or feigned smiles anymore. But how could she tell him that her heart still ached for another man? How could she admit to him that Jason—*Jason, who had broken her heart*—still haunted her thoughts? That his words still lingered in her mind and that she still felt something for him?

The guilt weighed heavily on her chest as she looked at Victor. He had been so kind, so understanding. He had been the one who had helped pick up the shattered pieces of her life after Jason left. He had been there when she cried, when she couldn’t pull herself together. He had loved her with a patience she hadn’t known she could find in someone else.

But tonight, despite the love she had for Victor, Jason’s shadow loomed large. Her thoughts were filled with his face, his voice. She couldn’t shake the feeling that something was left undone, something that had never really been finished. And now, as she sat in front of the man who loved her, she felt like a fraud.

Victor studied her for a long moment, his gaze unwavering. He knew her better than anyone else—knew when something wasn’t right. He placed his fork down slowly, his eyes not leaving hers.

"Is it about him?" he asked quietly, the words laced with hurt and understanding. "Jason, I mean."

Mia’s heart stopped. She froze, caught between her two worlds. Victor was always perceptive, but she hadn’t expected him to bring it up so directly. She swallowed hard, her throat dry. She opened her mouth to say something, but no words came out.

Victor sighed and leaned back in his chair. "Mia, I can see it. The way your mind drifts off every time someone mentions his name. I don’t want to push you, but I need to know where I stand with you. If there’s still something between you and him, I need to know. I don’t want to be the guy you settle for because you’re too afraid to face your past. I want to be loved, truly, not because I’m just here."

Mia’s heart ached as his words hit her like a wave. She knew he deserved better than this—better than the mess she had become. And here he was, being vulnerable with her, asking her to be honest about her feelings, while she couldn’t even give him a straight answer.

Tears welled up in her eyes as she looked at him. She opened her mouth to speak but only a choked sob escaped. Victor’s expression softened, and he reached out, gently taking her hand in his.

"You don’t have to say anything right now, Mia," he said quietly. "I just want you to know that I’m here. If you need time, take it. But I need to know you’re all in if we’re going to continue this."

Mia nodded, her chest tightening with guilt and frustration. She wasn’t sure she was ready to let go of Jason, not yet. But she didn’t want to hurt Victor, either. *Why can’t I figure this out?* she wondered, wiping away a tear that had escaped her eye. *Why is my heart torn between two men?*

As Victor squeezed her hand, Mia realized she had a decision to make. One that she wasn’t sure she was prepared to face.

**Chapter 4: Words Unspoken**

The soft hum of the city outside Jason's bedroom window was drowned out by the quiet, steady rhythm of his breath. The dim light from a nearby lamp cast warm shadows across the bed, illuminating the tangled sheets as Jason and Cassie lay beside each other, their bodies entwined in a moment of intimacy. The world outside seemed distant—just the two of them in their own little bubble, wrapped in the quiet comfort of each other’s presence.

Cassie smiled against Jason’s lips as they kissed, her fingers tracing the contours of his jaw, her heart light with the joy of the moment. It had been a year since she and Jason started dating, and though things hadn’t always been perfect, tonight felt right. She had him, and that was all that mattered.

Jason deepened the kiss, pulling her closer, his hand sliding down her back. His touch was tender, familiar, and in that moment, Cassie felt the bond between them strengthen. She could tell Jason was into it too—his hands were everywhere, his lips hungry as they explored the soft curves of her neck.

But then, without warning, a name slipped from his lips.

"Mia..."

Cassie froze. The warmth that had been spreading through her veins abruptly turned to ice. She pulled back, her face scrunching in confusion and disbelief. She stared at him, her chest tightening.

"What did you say?" she asked, her voice cold, her heart suddenly thudding in her ears.

Jason blinked, his eyes hazy from the passion of the moment. "Huh?" he murmured, his lips parting as if still caught in the afterglow. He was barely aware of what had just slipped out.

"You just... you just said her name," Cassie pressed, her tone sharp now, a sharp contrast to the tenderness she had felt just moments before. "You said Mia."

Jason's face fell, his eyes widening in realization as his heart sank. He tried to salvage the situation, but it was too late—Cassie had already pulled away, sitting up in the bed, her eyes burning with frustration and hurt.

"Are you serious, Jason?" she spat, her voice low but laced with anger. "How could you do this to me? We've been together for a year, and you're still thinking about her?"

Jason’s heart skipped a beat. He had hoped she hadn’t heard, but it was clear now that Cassie had caught every single word. "Cassie, no, I didn’t mean—" he started, but she cut him off.

"Don’t lie to me," she said, her voice thick with emotion. "I’ve seen the way you look at her. At the wedding... I saw you two. The way you were looking at each other. Don’t act like I didn’t notice, Jason. Don’t pretend like it didn’t mean anything."

Jason's throat tightened, the words caught in his chest. He had thought about Mia too many times to count, and every time he did, it was like a punch to his gut. But he had tried so hard to move on. Cassie was his present and future, and Mia was supposed to be the past. Yet, every time Mia crossed his mind, the memories of their love lingered in his mind, unresolved.

"I—I didn’t mean for it to be like that," Jason said, trying to reach out to her. "Cassie, I love you, okay? But Mia... I don’t know what happened. I just... I can’t help it. She’s always been a part of me."

Cassie’s face twisted with anger, her eyes flashing. "You love me? Really? Because it doesn’t seem that way. If you loved me, you wouldn’t still be hung up on her. You wouldn’t be calling her name when we’re together."

Jason opened his mouth to respond, but nothing came out. What could he say? How could he explain the depth of the feelings he still had for Mia? He couldn’t. Not to Cassie. Not when he had hurt her so badly already.

Cassie let out a bitter laugh. "I’m not going to be your second choice, Jason. I deserve more than that. I deserve a man who’s completely mine, not someone who’s still chasing ghosts."

The words stung, cutting deep, but Cassie was beyond caring. She swung her legs over the side of the bed, standing up and grabbing her robe.

"I’m done," she said, her voice steady, though it trembled with fury beneath the surface. "I’m done trying to make this work with someone who’s still holding onto the past."

Jason tried to stop her, his hand reaching out, but Cassie pulled away, her eyes narrowing.

"No, Jason. I need some space," she said, her voice clipped. "I’m going to sleep on the couch tonight. I don’t want to be in here with you."

With that, she stormed out of the bedroom, leaving Jason alone in the dim light, his heart sinking. He remained on the bed, his head spinning. He wanted to call after her, to explain everything, but he knew that there was nothing he could say. He had ruined everything.

The quiet of the room settled around him, his mind a tangled mess of regret and confusion. He had been so sure that he could move on, but here he was, facing the reality of his mistakes. He had hurt Cassie, and he had hurt Mia, all because he couldn’t let go of the past.

The door to the living room slammed shut, and Jason sat there in silence, his thoughts loud in his head, his heart heavy in his chest.

**Chapter 5: Heart-to-Heart**

The soft hum of the kettle boiling on the stove was the only sound in the kitchen as Mia sat at the counter, absently stirring a cup of tea. Her mind was far from the quiet comfort of her small apartment, racing with thoughts of Jason—thoughts that had consumed her since the wedding.

She hadn't been able to shake the image of him, the way he looked at her with those eyes full of regret and longing. It was like a pull, a magnet drawing her back in, but Mia knew better. She had already been down that road. Twice, actually.

Lily's voice broke through her thoughts as she breezed into the kitchen, the familiar scent of her perfume filling the space before she even appeared in the doorway. Mia could see the concern etched on her best friend's face, her brow furrowed with an unspoken question.

"You've been quiet lately," Lily said, leaning against the counter beside her. "What's going on, Mia?"

Mia didn't respond immediately, taking another sip of her tea and staring down into the mug. She could feel the weight of the past few days pressing on her chest. The whole wedding situation with Jason, the guilt over Victor, and the constant battle in her heart. She had always trusted Lily with her emotions, but today, she wasn't sure how to put the mess in her head into words.

Lily raised an eyebrow, her voice softening as she nudged her gently. "Come on, Mia. I know something's bothering you. You can talk to me."

Mia finally sighed, setting the mug down and running a hand through her hair. "It's Jason," she admitted quietly. "I just... I can't stop thinking about him. When I saw him at the wedding, it felt like everything I had tried to bury just came rushing back. I don't know, Lil, I just... I’m confused."

Lily watched her closely, her expression soft but serious. She didn't interrupt, letting Mia pour her heart out.

"I mean, I’ve moved on, right?" Mia continued, though her voice wavered. "I’ve got Victor, and he’s been amazing. He really has. But when Jason looked at me at that wedding, it felt like he was still in love with me. And I..." She stopped herself, her hands trembling slightly as she picked up the mug again, clutching it tightly. "I still love him, Lily. I know it’s stupid, but I do."

Lily took a deep breath, exhaling slowly as she considered her words. She had been Mia's best friend for years, and she knew her inside and out. This wasn’t just about the pain of the past—it was about Mia’s heart being pulled in two directions. But Lily had always been there for her, watching her rebuild after Jason had broken her, and she wasn’t going to let her friend fall back into the same trap.

"You’re not stupid, Mia," Lily said gently, her voice filled with compassion. "But you have to ask yourself something—how many times are you going to let Jason hurt you? How many times are you going to let him come back into your life just to mess with your heart?"

Mia winced, but she couldn’t deny it. She knew deep down that Jason had hurt her, badly. It was the kind of hurt that took years to recover from, even when she thought she was over it. But now, with him back in the picture, the old feelings seemed to resurface, confusing everything.

"I know," Mia whispered, staring at the counter, her voice breaking slightly. "I know he hurt me. I know I shouldn’t even be thinking about him, but it’s so hard, Lily. He was my first love. It’s not easy to just... forget that."

Lily nodded, her tone firm but loving. "I get it, I do. But Mia, you’ve got to remember what he did to you. What he put you through. You were broken when he left you. You cried for weeks, thinking you’d never be able to love again. You picked up the pieces, and you’re stronger now because of it. Don’t let him come back and destroy all of that."

Mia was quiet for a moment, absorbing Lily’s words. She had been so focused on the idea of Jason—on the feeling of being loved by him again—that she had forgotten the pain he had caused her. She had forgotten the sleepless nights, the endless self-doubt, and the feeling of being discarded as if she had meant nothing to him.

Lily continued, her voice softening as she placed a hand on Mia's. "You’ve got Victor now, Mia. He’s been there for you in ways Jason never was. He’s steady, and he cares about you. You don’t have to keep looking over your shoulder, wondering if Jason’s going to come back and sweep you off your feet. You deserve someone who is all in. Victor is that person. But if you let Jason back into your life, you risk losing everything, including Victor."

Mia’s heart twisted at the mention of Victor. He had been nothing but kind to her, patient when she was distant, loving when she doubted herself. He had given her everything—he deserved her heart, all of it.

"I don’t want to hurt Victor," Mia murmured, her voice thick with emotion. "He’s been so good to me, and I know he deserves better than me being all confused and stuck in the past."

"Exactly," Lily said, giving her hand a gentle squeeze. "So don’t let him down. You’ve moved on. You’ve built a life with someone who cares for you. Jason’s in the past. You need to close that door completely."

Mia nodded slowly, her mind finally beginning to clear. "You’re right," she said, her voice steady now. "I can’t keep doing this to myself. I can’t keep letting him have a hold over me. It’s time to move on completely. I owe it to Victor—and to myself."

Lily smiled warmly, her eyes filled with pride. "You’ve got this, Mia. Just remember—Jason may have been your first love, but Victor is your future. Don’t let the past steal that from you."

Mia took a deep breath, feeling the weight of her decision finally settling in her chest. She was ready to let go of Jason once and for all. It wasn’t going to be easy, but it was the right thing to do. For her, for Victor, and for the life she wanted to build.

"Thanks, Lil," she said quietly. "I really needed to hear that."

Lily smiled, pulling her into a hug. "Anytime, Mia. You’re my best friend. And I’ll always be here for you, no matter what."

As Mia held onto Lily, the knot in her chest began to loosen. She knew the road ahead wouldn’t be easy, but for the first time in a long time, she felt like she was on the right path.

**Chapter 6: Advice Over Drinks**

The atmosphere in the bar was laid-back, the hum of casual conversations blending with the clink of glasses. It was a typical evening for Daniel, Desmond, and Victor. The three of them sat at their usual corner table, the dim lights casting a warm glow over their drinks. Victor’s eyes were distant as he absentmindedly swirled the contents of his glass.

Daniel, ever the storyteller, was animatedly recounting his most recent disastrous date, punctuating the tale with exaggerated hand gestures and an exaggerated sigh. "So there I am," Daniel continued, "on this date with this girl who seemed perfect, right? Gorgeous, intelligent, and all that. But the second we sit down at the restaurant, she starts talking about how she’s 'allergic' to food. Not just a few things—she had a list that was literally longer than my shopping cart!" He laughed, shaking his head. "I’m sitting there thinking, 'How do you even survive without eating?’"

Desmond chuckled, shaking his head. "Man, sounds like you dodged a bullet there."

Victor, however, wasn’t paying attention. His mind was miles away, replaying the evening he spent with Mia at his apartment. The dinner had started out perfectly—nothing too fancy, just a quiet night in. But somewhere along the way, he had noticed a shift in Mia. It was subtle, at first. She’d seemed distracted, her thoughts clearly somewhere else. He’d tried to dismiss it, but as the night wore on, it became more and more obvious. And then, the moment they had tried to get intimate... It was like something clicked in him. Mia had pulled away, apologizing, but he could see the confusion in her eyes.

Victor didn’t want to believe it, but it was as if he could feel the lingering pull she still had for Jason. It hurt, more than he’d like to admit. Victor had already known that Mia had a past with Jason, but the idea that he was still in her heart... it unsettled him.

"Hey, Victor!" Daniel’s voice broke through his thoughts, pulling him back to the present.

Victor blinked, meeting his friend's gaze. "What?"

Daniel and Desmond exchanged glances. "You’ve been zoning out for the past ten minutes, man," Desmond remarked, sipping his drink. "What’s going on with you?"

Victor hesitated for a moment. It wasn’t like him to be so obvious, but his friends had known him too long to miss a shift in his mood. Finally, he sighed, placing his drink down and leaning back in his chair. "It’s Mia," he said, his voice quieter than usual.

Daniel raised an eyebrow. "Mia? Is everything alright with her?"

Victor ran a hand through his hair, frustration evident in his expression. "I don’t know, man. I really don’t. She came over for dinner last night, and everything seemed perfect. But there was this... I don’t know, this distance between us. Like, she wasn’t really there, you know? And I don’t think it’s just because of us. I think she’s still hung up on Jason."

Desmond, who had been silent up until that point, leaned forward. "Ah, the ex-boyfriend. That’s a tricky one," he said with a wry smile. "It’s never easy when your girl’s got some unfinished business."

Victor clenched his jaw, trying to keep his emotions in check. "I get that. I know she’s got history with him. But we’ve been together for a while now, and I can’t shake the feeling that he’s still in her head. It’s like... like I’m second best. And I don’t want to be that guy, you know? I don’t want to feel like I’m just the guy she’s with because she can’t have him."

Desmond leaned back, thinking carefully. "Victor, listen to me," he said. "You’ve got to stop looking at this like a competition. Mia doesn’t need you to be her backup plan. If she’s still holding onto Jason, that’s something she has to deal with, not you."

"I get that," Victor replied, his voice tight. "But it’s hard, man. I really like her. I care about her. And it’s not just about the physical stuff—it’s deeper than that. I can see a future with her. But how do I get through to her if she’s still stuck on him?"

Daniel, who had been quiet for a moment, leaned in and offered his take. "Man, you can’t force someone to choose you. If Mia’s confused, she’s gotta figure that out on her own. You can’t do it for her. But what you can do is show her how much you care. Be there for her, but don’t let her use you as a safety net. If you’re gonna do this, do it because you want her—not because you’re trying to fix something broken in her."

Victor thought about it. He knew Daniel was right. But it was easier said than done. "So, what do I do? Just wait around while she figures things out?"

Desmond chimed in, his tone now more serious. "No, you don’t wait around. You live your life, Victor. Don’t put your happiness on pause while she figures out her own mess. Be the man she can count on, but don’t lose yourself in the process. If she chooses you, then it’s because she wants you—not because she’s afraid of losing you."

Victor was quiet for a moment, taking in his friends’ advice. Desmond’s words stung, but there was a truth to them that he couldn’t ignore. He had been so focused on winning Mia’s heart that he had almost forgotten about himself.

"Thanks, guys," Victor said finally, his voice more certain. "I needed to hear that."

Daniel smiled, raising his glass in a toast. "To clarity, then."

Victor chuckled and clinked his glass against his friends'. "To clarity."

Desmond leaned back in his chair, his gaze thoughtful. "And if that doesn’t work, man, we’ll get you back in the game. No woman can resist a guy who knows what he wants."

Victor laughed, but it didn’t quite reach his eyes. He still had a lot to figure out with Mia, but one thing was clear: he couldn’t keep chasing her while she was still running in circles around her past.

**Chapter 7: The Warning**

It was an ordinary Tuesday afternoon when Lily ran into Jason at the supermarket. The soft hum of fluorescent lights above and the faint rustle of shoppers created an almost serene atmosphere. She was pushing her cart down the aisle, distracted by the list in her hand, when she turned the corner and nearly collided with him.

"Jason," Lily said, raising an eyebrow as she came to a halt. "Well, this is a surprise."

Jason looked up, his face immediately lighting up at the sight of her. He had been walking aimlessly through the aisles, his mind preoccupied with a thousand thoughts, when he saw her. There she was—Lily, the one person who could always get through to Mia. The one person who understood everything. And in that moment, he realized that if anyone could help him fix the mess he’d made, it was Lily.

"Hey, Lily," Jason said, his voice a little too eager. "I’ve been meaning to talk to you. I... I need you to do something for me."

Lily tilted her head slightly, her expression guarded. "What’s going on, Jason? You don’t look like yourself."

Jason’s brow furrowed as he glanced around the store, almost as though he was worried someone might overhear. "It’s about Mia," he said in a low voice. "I know we haven’t talked in a while, but... I need you to talk to her for me. I know she’s still got feelings for me, and I just... I need you to convince her to give me another chance."

Lily’s lips pressed into a thin line. She had expected this, of course. Jason had always been good at showing up when things got complicated, but it was never for the right reasons. She had been Mia’s best friend for years, and she knew exactly what was going on in Jason’s mind. The moment Mia walked away from him, Jason had realized what he lost—but he’d only decided to act when it was too late.

"Mia’s moved on, Jason," Lily said firmly, her tone no longer as friendly as it had been when she first greeted him. "She’s happy now. With Victor."

Jason’s face tightened, but he refused to let the disappointment show. "I don’t think she’s really over me, though. I know her better than anyone else, Lily. We were together for six years."

Lily shook her head, her expression hardening. "You don’t get it, do you?" she said, her voice laced with frustration. "You left her, Jason. You broke her. You walked away after all those years, and now you’re showing up when it’s convenient for you, trying to undo everything you’ve done. Mia was devastated when you left. She was crushed, and I had to watch her pick up the pieces of herself, all while you were off doing God knows what."

Jason swallowed, his gaze dropping to the floor for a brief moment. He had never liked to be reminded of how much pain he’d caused Mia. "I didn’t mean for it to happen that way," he said quietly. "I never wanted to hurt her."

"But you did," Lily interjected, her voice sharp. "You left her, Jason. And she has every right to move on, to be happy with someone else. She doesn’t need you to come in and mess things up again. You had your chance, and you threw it away."

Jason looked at her, his eyes pleading. "But she’s with Victor now. She’s... she’s not in love with him. She can’t be."

Lily’s eyes softened for a moment, but her resolve didn’t waver. "Victor has been there for her in ways you never were. He’s patient, he’s kind, and he’s been there for Mia when she needed him most. He doesn’t deserve to have you coming around, stirring things up. You had your chance, Jason. And it’s over."

Jason opened his mouth to protest, but Lily held up a hand, stopping him. "I’m not done. You don’t get to just waltz back into Mia’s life like nothing happened. She’s moved on. She’s better off without you in it. And you need to respect that."

Jason took a step back, his heart sinking with each word. He had thought maybe, just maybe, there was a chance to rekindle things with Mia. But as Lily spoke, he realized the truth—Mia had let go, and he was the one left holding the broken pieces.

"I’m not asking you to forgive me, Lily," Jason said quietly, the fight in his voice gone. "I just want her to know how sorry I am. I want to make things right."

Lily’s gaze softened, but she stood firm. "It’s too late for that," she said, her voice gentle but unwavering. "Mia has forgiven you. But she’s not going to let you back in. And you need to respect that."

Jason exhaled, a heavy weight settling in his chest. He had wanted so badly for things to be different, for things to go back to how they were before everything fell apart. But the reality was inescapable. Mia had moved on. And no matter how much he regretted his actions, he couldn’t change the past.

Lily’s eyes softened with a mixture of pity and resolve. "You need to focus on your relationship with Cassie now. Stop obsessing over Mia and let her live her life. If you truly care about anyone, it should be Cassie. Don’t make the same mistake twice."

Jason nodded silently, feeling the sting of Lily’s words. He had lost Mia once. Now, he was in danger of losing Cassie as well.

Lily turned and began walking down the aisle, not waiting for Jason to say anything more. Jason stood there for a long moment, the weight of her words sinking in.

He had lost Mia. And now, he feared he might be losing everything else.

**Chapter 8: Obsession**

The evening had descended quietly around Jason as he sat in his dimly lit living room, the only sound being the soft hum of the refrigerator in the kitchen. His mind, however, was far from calm. After his confrontation with Lily at the supermarket, he’d convinced himself that he could move on. He had told himself that Mia was no longer a part of his life, that she had moved on with Victor, and that he had Cassie now, who—despite her flaws—had been a source of comfort and stability in his life.

But as the night dragged on, a restlessness stirred inside him. The more he thought about everything, the more he couldn’t shake the feeling that he’d made the biggest mistake of his life. Mia... Mia had been his world once. She had been the one person who truly understood him, and he had let her go so easily. He had let pride and fear dictate his actions, and now she was slipping further and further from his reach.

Jason pulled his phone from the couch beside him, the screen lighting up in his hand. Without thinking, his fingers typed her name into the search bar. Mia had always been active on social media—her Instagram feed full of vibrant photos of her adventures, her friends, her smiles. He hadn’t looked at her account in months, not since everything fell apart, but now, it felt like a magnet pulling him in.

His heart thudded in his chest as he clicked on her profile. There it was—the account with her name, her face. He hesitated for a moment, his thumb hovering over the screen. But curiosity won over. Slowly, almost reverently, he scrolled through her posts. The images that greeted him were nothing like the Mia he remembered. In just three years, she had transformed. She was glowing—more radiant than he ever thought possible.

Each picture was a testament to how far she’d come, how much she had grown. She was standing in front of a breathtaking sunset in Bali. Laughing with friends at a party. Posing confidently in a chic outfit on some city street. Her smile was brighter than ever, her eyes full of life and joy. Jason couldn’t tear his eyes away.

It was like seeing a goddess for the first time.

He zoomed in on one of her pictures—her in a flowing white dress at some beach party, hair wild from the wind, the sun setting behind her, casting her in a golden light. She looked like the woman he had always dreamed she would become, but never in a million years had he thought it would be without him. It hit him like a punch to the gut. He had let her go, and now she was everything he had always wanted—except, this time, it wasn’t for him.

The realization burned in his chest. How had he been so blind? How had he let her slip through his fingers?

His finger hovered over her face in the photo, gently tracing the screen. He felt a pang in his heart, a longing that no amount of alcohol or distractions could cure. He missed her. He missed her so much.

But just as he was about to scroll down further, to lose himself once more in her life, a sharp voice cut through the quiet of the room.

"What the hell is this, Jason?"

Jason’s head whipped up, and his heart nearly stopped when he saw Cassie standing in the doorway, her arms crossed, eyes flashing with fury. She had been standing there for who knows how long, watching him scroll through Mia’s Instagram.

Jason’s stomach dropped. He had been so absorbed in the images of Mia, so consumed by his thoughts of her, that he hadn’t heard her walk in.

Cassie’s face twisted in anger as she stormed toward him. "You’re looking at her again, aren’t you?" she spat, her voice sharp with betrayal. "After everything you’ve done to me, after everything we’ve been through, you’re still obsessed with her. Still thinking about Mia."

Jason opened his mouth to say something, to explain, but Cassie wasn’t having any of it.

"No, don’t," she snapped, cutting him off. "I’ve put up with your crap for long enough. I’ve been here for you, but you’ve never been fully here for me. You’re still in love with her, Jason. You still want her."

Jason stood up quickly, panic rising in his chest. "Cassie, no. It’s not like that. I—I was just—"

"No!" she shouted, her voice cracking with emotion. "You’ve been looking at her pictures for hours, fantasizing about her, and I’m standing right here! I’m the one who’s been by your side while you’ve been pining for her. Do you even see me? Do you even care about me at all?"

Jason took a step forward, his hand reaching out for her, but Cassie recoiled, her eyes filled with hurt and rage.

"I can’t do this anymore," she said, her voice shaking. "I’m done."

Before Jason could say another word, she turned on her heel and marched toward the door.

"Cassie, wait!" Jason called out, his heart pounding. He rushed after her, but she was already halfway to the door.

"I can’t be second choice, Jason. I won’t be," she said, her voice small but resolute. "You can’t keep stringing me along while you obsess over someone else. I deserve better than that."

With those final words, she slammed the door behind her, leaving Jason standing in the middle of the room, utterly stunned.

He stood there for what felt like an eternity, the silence in the room deafening.

**Chapter 9: Trying to Make Amends**

Jason had spent the entire night tossing and turning, his thoughts consumed with the events of the evening. Cassie’s words echoed in his mind like a haunting refrain. “You can’t keep stringing me along while you obsess over someone else.”

He had tried to convince himself that he was done with Mia, but deep down, he knew it was going to take more than just words to move past her. She had been the love of his life, and even now, as he tried to focus on Cassie, a part of him still longed for the woman he had let slip away. But that was over now, wasn’t it?

Jason needed to fix things with Cassie. He needed her back—needed to make her believe that Mia was truly out of the picture. He owed it to her. He owed it to himself to stop running from the consequences of his actions.

With a deep sigh, Jason pulled himself out of bed the next morning. He couldn’t let Cassie go. She was angry, hurt, and confused, but Jason had always known her heart was soft. He just had to find a way to reach it.

By the time the afternoon sun dipped low in the sky, Jason was standing outside Cassie’s apartment, his stomach in knots. He hadn’t seen her since the night she stormed out of his house, and the thought of facing her made his palms sweat. But he had to do this. He had to make things right.

He rang the doorbell and waited, heart hammering in his chest. The seconds dragged on as he paced nervously outside. Finally, the door creaked open, and there she stood—Cassie, her expression a mixture of guarded curiosity and lingering anger.

"Jason," she said, her voice low. "What are you doing here?"

"I need to talk," he said, swallowing hard. "I’ve been an idiot. I don’t expect you to forgive me right away, but I can’t just let you walk out of my life without at least explaining myself."

Cassie folded her arms, her eyes narrowing. "Explain? After everything?"

Jason nodded, his eyes pleading. "Yes. I was wrong, Cassie. I was so caught up in my own mess with Mia that I lost sight of what really mattered. I know I hurt you, and I’m sorry. But I want you to know that Mia is not a part of my life anymore. I promise you. It’s only you now."

Cassie stared at him for a long moment, as if weighing his words. She looked tired, her usual spark dimmed by disappointment. But Jason could see something in her eyes—something that wasn’t entirely closed off.

“I don’t know if I can believe you,” she said softly. “How am I supposed to trust you again?”

Jason stepped closer, keeping his voice gentle. “I understand why you’d feel that way. But I swear, Cassie, I’m done with her. I want us to start over. I want to be with you. I’ve learned my lesson the hard way, and I don’t want to lose you too.”

There was a long silence as Cassie processed his words. Jason held his breath, waiting for her to speak.

“I don’t want to be second choice, Jason,” she said, her voice thick with emotion. “I need to know that I’m the one you want. Not just because Mia’s out of the picture, but because you truly want me.”

Jason’s heart ached. “Cassie, you are the one I want. I know I’ve messed up, but I’m ready to give you everything. Just give me a chance to prove it to you.”

She stood there, her eyes searching his face for any trace of dishonesty, before finally nodding. “Okay,” she whispered. “I’ll give you another chance. But this is it, Jason. No more games.”

Jason’s heart soared with relief. He stepped forward and wrapped his arms around her, pulling her close. He felt the tension leave her body as she melted into his embrace.

“I won’t mess this up, I promise,” he murmured into her hair.

For a moment, they just stood there, holding each other in the quiet of her apartment. It felt like everything could go back to normal—like the past few months of heartache and confusion could simply fade away.

That evening, after they’d talked through their feelings, Cassie agreed to spend the night at Jason’s place. They had dinner together—casual, intimate—and for the first time in a long while, Jason felt a glimmer of hope. They talked about the future, about what they wanted, and it felt... right.

As night fell, Jason kissed Cassie, his hands roaming over her body, feeling the familiar warmth of her skin. They made love like they had never stopped, the passion between them reigniting with a fire that took him by surprise. For a brief moment, as their bodies intertwined, Jason felt like he was finally back on track.

Cassie was the woman in his life now. Not Mia.

For the first time in weeks, Jason felt at peace. He had her. And for a while, that was all that mattered.

But as they lay together afterward, tangled in sheets, Jason’s mind betrayed him. Despite the warmth of Cassie beside him, despite the tenderness they had shared, he couldn’t help but wonder if it was truly enough.

Could he really move on from Mia?

No, he told himself. Mia was in the past.

But deep down, Jason knew that it wasn’t so simple.

**Chapter 10: Mia’s Reflection**

Mia sat in her favorite spot by the window, a steaming cup of tea cradled in her hands. The faint hum of the city buzzed in the background, blending with the chirping of birds outside her window. Her apartment was unusually quiet today, and for once, she welcomed the silence. The afternoon sunlight streamed through the lace curtains, painting golden patterns on the walls. It was a serene moment, one she desperately needed, yet her mind was anything but calm.

Jason.

His name echoed in her thoughts like a stubborn melody she couldn’t shake off. She had tried—really tried—to suppress the memories, to convince herself she was over him. But ever since she saw him at the wedding, everything had unraveled. Seeing him again had stirred emotions she thought she had buried. And then there was Victor—the man who had shown her that love could be steady, gentle, and healing. But despite all of Victor's goodness, Jason’s shadow loomed large.

Mia exhaled heavily, her breath fogging up the rim of her cup. She had spent years piecing herself back together after Jason broke her heart. Six years of love and memories shattered in one evening at a restaurant, with a breakup she never saw coming. The pain had been unbearable then, and it was a pain she never wanted to feel again.

But why, then, did seeing Jason at the wedding shake her so deeply? Was it nostalgia? Regret? Or was it simply the unfinished story between them clawing its way back to the surface?

Her phone buzzed on the coffee table, pulling her back to the present. She reached for it absentmindedly, glancing at the screen. It was Lily.

*How are you holding up, girl? Thinking about you.*

Mia stared at the message for a moment, her lips twitching into a faint smile. Lily always seemed to have impeccable timing. She started typing a reply, hesitated, and then erased it. How could she put into words the storm brewing inside her?

Her phone buzzed again.

*Don’t overthink it. Just tell me what’s on your mind.*

Mia sighed, her fingers finally moving across the screen.

*I’m okay. Just thinking about Jason again.*

The reply came almost instantly.

*Girl, no. He’s not worth it. You’ve got Victor now—a man who actually deserves you.*

Mia set the phone down, unable to argue with Lily’s words. Victor *was* everything she could ask for in a partner. He was patient, kind, and attentive. He had been there for her during her lowest moments, never asking for anything in return. And yet, her thoughts kept drifting back to Jason.

Her heart clenched as she remembered the way Jason looked at her at the wedding—like she was the only person in the room. It was the same way he used to look at her when they were together, back when their love felt invincible. But that love had crumbled, hadn’t it? He had shattered it when he walked away, leaving her to pick up the pieces of a life they had built together.

She shook her head, trying to dispel the memories. She couldn’t afford to let them consume her. Victor deserved better. He deserved her full attention, her whole heart—not the fragmented pieces Jason had left behind.

Her phone buzzed again. Another message from Lily.

*Come over for dinner tonight. Victor’s cooking and the boys will be around too. I think he’d love to see you. Plus, you could use a distraction.*

Mia stared at the message, her heart heavy with guilt. Victor had noticed her distance lately; she could see it in his eyes. He hadn’t said anything, but she knew he felt it. And how could he not? She had been physically present but emotionally absent, her mind occupied with memories of a man she swore she was over.

*I’ll be there,* she typed back, her fingers trembling slightly. *Thanks for always having my back.*

Mia set the phone down and glanced around her apartment. It was spotless—her nervous energy from the past week had driven her to clean and reorganize every corner. But no amount of cleaning could scrub away the confusion and guilt she felt.

Her gaze drifted to the photo on her bookshelf—a picture of her and Victor at the park. His arm was draped around her shoulders, his smile as radiant as the sun. She remembered that day vividly. It had been one of the first times she genuinely felt happy again, like she could move forward and leave the past behind.

So why couldn’t she let go now? Why did Jason still have such a hold on her, even after all this time?

She got up, her tea forgotten on the windowsill, and walked over to the bookshelf. Picking up the photo frame, she studied Victor’s face. He loved her. She knew that. And deep down, she loved him too. But was it the kind of love that could overshadow the pain and passion she had shared with Jason?

Her phone buzzed again, this time with a call. She glanced at the screen, half-expecting to see Jason’s name. But it was Victor.

“Hey,” she answered, trying to keep her voice steady.

“Hey, beautiful,” his warm voice came through the line. “I just wanted to check in. Are you okay?”

Mia closed her eyes, a wave of emotion washing over her. He always knew how to ask the right questions, even when she didn’t have the answers.

“I’m okay,” she replied softly. “Just...thinking.”

“About anything in particular?” he asked, his tone gentle but probing.

“Not really,” she lied, hating herself for the deception. “Just life, you know?”

There was a pause on the other end before Victor spoke again. “I miss you, Mia. I feel like you’ve been distant lately. Is everything okay between us?”

Her heart ached at his words. He deserved the truth, but she wasn’t sure if she could give it to him. Not yet.

“I’m fine, Victor,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper. “I’ll see you tonight, okay?”

“Okay,” he replied, though she could hear the uncertainty in his voice. “I love you.”

“I love you too,” she said, hanging up before the tears could spill over.

Mia sank back onto the couch, clutching the photo frame to her chest. She needed to make a choice, once and for all. Jason was her past, and Victor was her future. It was time to stop living in between.

Taking a deep breath, she set the photo back on the shelf and headed to her bedroom to get ready for dinner. Tonight, she would try to be fully present—for Victor, for herself. She owed them both that much. But as she pulled out her favorite dress, a small voice in the back of her mind whispered a truth she wasn’t ready to face.

Some loves never truly go away.

**Chapter 11: The Dinner That Turned Awkward**

Victor’s cozy apartment was alive with laughter and the tantalizing aroma of freshly made pasta. The dim, warm lights cast a golden hue over the room, and the table was set impeccably, as always. Mia couldn’t help but admire how much effort Victor put into everything he did. The man had a knack for turning the simplest gatherings into memorable experiences.

She glanced at him as he moved around the kitchen, putting the final touches on dinner. His apron was slightly askew, and his hair a little messy, but to Mia, he looked perfect. Cooking came so naturally to him, and it was one of the many things she adored about him. She couldn’t deny the comfort and stability he brought to her life.

"Okay, guys, dinner is ready!" Victor called, carrying a large bowl of creamy pasta to the dining table.

Lily, Desmond, and Daniel, who had been lounging on the couch, eagerly made their way to the table.

“Wow, Victor, this smells amazing,” Lily said, settling into her seat.

“Yeah, man,” Daniel chimed in, grabbing his fork. “If I were a lady, I’d marry you just so I could eat like this every day.”

The table erupted into laughter, and Victor shook his head, a grin on his face. “Well, thank you, Daniel. But unfortunately for you, I’m already taken.”

Mia smiled faintly, her cheeks flushing at Victor’s comment. She felt his hand brush hers under the table, a subtle gesture of affection that didn’t go unnoticed.

Dinner was delightful, as always. The pasta was rich and flavorful, paired with perfectly grilled turkey and a crisp salad. The conversation flowed easily, with Daniel entertaining everyone with his outrageous stories, Desmond chiming in with his sarcastic remarks, and Lily laughing so hard she nearly spilled her wine.

For a moment, Mia felt like she could breathe. This was her safe space—surrounded by good friends and a man who genuinely cared for her. But lurking in the back of her mind was the shadow of Jason, his face flashing in her thoughts like a persistent echo.

After dinner, as Victor was clearing the plates, Lily clapped her hands together. “Okay, guys, let’s play a game! Something fun to lighten the mood.”

“What kind of game?” Desmond asked, leaning back in his chair.

“‘Never Have I Ever,’” Lily announced with a mischievous grin.

“Oh boy,” Daniel said, rubbing his hands together. “Things are about to get interesting.”

Victor returned with a bottle of wine and a set of shot glasses. “I see where this is going,” he said, laughing. “But I’m game.”

The rules were simple: each person would make a statement starting with "Never have I ever," and if anyone at the table had done that thing, they had to take a drink.

The game started off lighthearted enough.

“Never have I ever had sex on a first date,” Lily said, and to everyone’s surprise, Desmond took a drink.

“Seriously, Desmond?” Mia laughed.

“What can I say? College was wild,” he replied with a shrug.

“Never have I ever been on a blind date,” Daniel said next. This time, both Lily and Victor took a drink, prompting teasing from the group.

As the game went on, the questions grew bolder. Laughter filled the room, and the bottle of wine quickly dwindled. For a while, it felt like old times—easy and carefree.

Then Daniel spoke.

“Never have I ever thought about getting back with my ex.”

The room went silent.

The lighthearted atmosphere evaporated in an instant, replaced by a tense stillness. Mia’s breath hitched, her eyes flickering to Victor. He didn’t look at her, his gaze fixed on the now-empty wine bottle. His face betrayed no emotion, but his silence spoke volumes.

Daniel, oblivious to the weight of his statement, took a sip of his drink. Lily shot him a look that screamed *You’ve really messed up now.*

“Daniel,” she hissed under her breath, but the damage was already done.

Mia’s cheeks burned as she felt everyone’s eyes on her. She glanced at Victor again, but he still didn’t meet her gaze. The guilt she had been trying so hard to suppress bubbled to the surface, threatening to choke her.

“I think I’m done for the night,” she said abruptly, standing up. Her chair scraped against the floor, the sound unnaturally loud in the silence.

“Mia—” Victor started, but she shook her head.

“Thanks for dinner, Victor. It was lovely,” she said, her voice tight. Without waiting for a response, she grabbed her purse and headed for the door.

“Mia, wait,” Lily called after her, but Mia was already gone.

The room remained silent for a moment after her departure. Daniel looked around, confused. “What just happened?”

“You, Daniel,” Lily snapped. “You happened.”

Victor finally stood, running a hand through his hair. “It’s fine. I’ll talk to her later,” he said, though his voice was strained.

Desmond leaned back in his chair, letting out a low whistle. “Man, you really know how to kill a vibe, don’t you, Daniel?”

Daniel looked genuinely remorseful now. “I didn’t mean to upset her. I was just joking.”

“Well, next time, think before you speak,” Lily retorted.

Victor collected the empty glasses, his mind elsewhere. He could still see the look on Mia’s face as she left—the hurt, the guilt, the confusion. He hated seeing her like that, especially knowing he might be part of the reason for her pain.

As the others continued to argue about Daniel’s insensitivity, Victor retreated to the kitchen, needing a moment to himself. He stared out the window, his thoughts a jumbled mess. He loved Mia—he had no doubt about that. But tonight had revealed cracks in their relationship that he wasn’t sure how to fix.

And for the first time, he wondered if he was enough to fill the void Jason had left in her heart.

**Chapter 12: My leftover**

The scent of freshly washed hair and chemical treatments filled the chic, buzzing salon. Women sat in comfortable chairs, some flipping through magazines, others chatting animatedly as stylists worked their magic. Mia walked in, her natural confidence radiating as she approached the receptionist to confirm her appointment.

It was supposed to be a relaxing day. A day to pamper herself and clear her mind from the whirlwind of emotions she’d been dealing with—Victor, Jason, and everything in between. She needed this moment of peace. But fate, as usual, had other plans.

As Mia took a seat to wait for her stylist, she heard a familiar voice—a voice that made her stiffen in her chair.

Cassie.

Her heart sank. The last person she wanted to see right now was Jason’s girlfriend.

Cassie was at the far end of the salon, leaning back as her stylist carefully worked on her hair. Her gaze flicked up to the mirror, and their eyes met. For a moment, neither of them said a word. Cassie’s lips curled into a smirk, while Mia maintained a neutral expression, though her heart raced.

“Well, well, well,” Cassie said loudly, sitting up straighter. “If it isn’t Mia.”

Heads turned briefly at the sudden declaration, but most of the women quickly returned to their own conversations. Mia took a deep breath, forcing herself to stay composed as she walked over to greet her former classmate.

“Cassie,” Mia said coolly, her voice steady. “It’s been a while.”

“Not long enough,” Cassie muttered under her breath, but loud enough for Mia to hear.

Mia raised an eyebrow. “Excuse me?”

Cassie shrugged, feigning innocence. “Oh, nothing. Just surprised to see you here, that’s all.”

The stylist working on Cassie’s hair suddenly found an excuse to leave, sensing the tension brewing. Cassie crossed her legs and folded her arms, tilting her head as she looked at Mia.

“You know,” Cassie began, her tone sharp, “I always knew we’d run into each other someday. It’s funny, isn’t it? How life works.”

Mia gave a tight smile. “What’s funny about it?”

Cassie leaned forward slightly. “That you’re Jason’s ex, and I’m his present.”

Mia’s jaw clenched, but she refused to rise to the bait. “I didn’t realize this was a competition.”

Cassie scoffed. “Oh, it’s not. Because I’ve already won.” She leaned back in her chair, a smug look on her face. “I have Jason now. He’s mine, Mia. And just so we’re clear, he’s never coming back to you.”

Mia felt a pang of jealousy, though she hated to admit it. Jason had always been the guy every girl wanted, and for a while, he had been hers. She remembered how it felt to walk around campus, knowing she was with the most desired guy in college. It had been a source of pride, a kind of validation. And now, Cassie had that.

“I’m happy for you,” Mia said, her voice laced with sarcasm. “Really, I am. Enjoy him while you can.”

Cassie’s eyes narrowed. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Mia smirked. “It means you’re eating my leftovers, Cassie. I was the first to know just how good Jason is—in every way.”

Cassie’s face flushed with anger, but she quickly regained her composure. “Leftovers?” she repeated, laughing bitterly. “Honey, if anyone’s eating leftovers, it’s you. You can live in your little fantasy world where Jason still loves you, but let’s be real—he’s with me now. I’m the one who gets to go to bed with him every night, feel his hands on me, hear him say my name.”

Mia’s stomach churned, but she refused to let Cassie see how her words affected her. She crossed her arms and tilted her head, her smirk growing. “Good for you, Cassie. But let’s not forget who Jason loved first. I’ll always be his first love, and deep down, you know that.”

Cassie’s confidence faltered for a moment, but she quickly masked it with a cold glare. “You’re delusional.”

“And you’re insecure,” Mia shot back. “Otherwise, you wouldn’t feel the need to remind me of how happy you think you are with him.”

Cassie opened her mouth to retort, but before she could, Mia’s stylist returned, looking between the two women nervously.

“Ms. Mia, we’re ready for you,” she said, her voice tentative.

Mia nodded and turned to Cassie one last time. “Enjoy your day, Cassie. And Jason too, of course.” With that, she walked away, leaving Cassie fuming in her chair.

As Mia settled into her own stylist’s chair, she felt a mix of emotions—anger, jealousy, and a hint of satisfaction. The encounter had been draining, but part of her was glad she hadn’t backed down.

Still, as the stylist began working on her hair, she couldn’t help but wonder what Cassie had said about Jason calling her name. Could there still be something lingering between them? Did Jason still love her? And more importantly, did she still love him?

Mia shook her head, trying to clear her thoughts. She had Victor now, and he deserved better than her pining over a man who had broken her heart.

But no matter how hard she tried, the conversation with Cassie replayed in her mind, leaving her more confused than ever.

**Chapter 13: Confessions Over pizza**

Mia sat across from Lily at their favorite pizza shop, her hands wrapped around a glass of chilled yogurt . The sun poured through the large windows, bathing the space in a warm glow. It was the kind of serene atmosphere Mia usually loved, but today, her mind was anything but calm.

“So, let me get this straight,” Lily said, leaning back in her chair. “You ran into Cassie at the salon, and she basically tried to mark her territory?”

Mia nodded, a small, bitter laugh escaping her lips. “That’s one way to put it. She made it very clear that Jason is hers now. Even went as far as to tell me how good he is in bed.”

Lily raised an eyebrow, her lips pursed. “Wow. Classy.”

“I know, right?” Mia said, rolling her eyes. “But I didn’t just sit there and take it. I told her she was eating my leftovers.”

Lily’s eyes widened, and she let out a surprised laugh. “You said that? Oh my God, Mia!”

Mia shrugged, a hint of a smirk tugging at her lips. “What? She started it.”

Lily shook her head, her laughter subsiding. “I mean, I get it. She was being a total witch, and she deserved it. But still, was that really necessary?”

Mia sighed, her smirk fading. “Probably not. But I couldn’t let her think she could just walk all over me.”

“And you didn’t,” Lily said, her tone softening. “I’m proud of you for standing your ground. But, Mia... you’re better than that. You don’t need to stoop to her level.”

Mia nodded slowly, staring down at her coffee. “You’re right. It’s just—seeing her, hearing her talk about Jason like that... It stirred something in me. Something I thought I’d buried.”

Lily leaned forward, her expression serious. “Mia, are you really over him?”

“Yes,” Mia said quickly, too quickly.

Lily tilted her head, her skeptical gaze fixed on Mia. “Are you sure about that? Because it doesn’t sound like you are.”

Mia hesitated, her heart pounding. She wanted to say yes, to convince both Lily and herself that she had moved on. But the truth was, ever since her encounter with Cassie, Jason had been consuming her thoughts in a way she hadn’t felt in years.

“I don’t know,” Mia admitted finally, her voice barely above a whisper. “I want to be over him. I really do. But hearing Cassie say she’s warming his bed... it messed with my head. I started thinking about him again, about us.”

Lily’s brows furrowed. “What do you mean?”

Mia took a deep breath, her cheeks flushing. “I mean... I’ve been fantasizing about him. About us being together again. About... about making love to him.”

Lily’s eyes widened, and she sat back in her chair, stunned. “Mia...”

“I know it’s wrong,” Mia said quickly, her voice laced with guilt. “I have Victor, and he’s amazing. He deserves better than this. But I can’t help it, Lily. I keep picturing Jason—his hands on me, his lips on mine, the way he used to—”

“Okay, stop,” Lily said, holding up a hand. “I get the picture.”

Mia buried her face in her hands, groaning. “What is wrong with me? Why can’t I let him go?”

Lily reached across the table, placing a comforting hand on Mia’s arm. “Mia, there’s nothing wrong with you. Feelings like this don’t just disappear overnight, especially after everything you and Jason had. But you need to figure out what you really want. If you’re still hung up on Jason, you owe it to Victor to be honest with him.”

Mia looked up, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. “I don’t want to hurt Victor. He’s been so good to me.”

“And that’s why you need to sort this out,” Lily said gently. “You can’t keep living in this limbo. Either let Jason go for good, or... I don’t know, confront these feelings and figure out if they’re worth losing Victor over.”

Mia nodded, though her heart felt heavy. “I hate this. I hate that Jason still has this power over me.”

“He only has as much power as you give him,” Lily said firmly. “You’re stronger than this, Mia. I know you are.”

Mia managed a small smile, grateful for Lily’s unwavering support. “Thanks, Lily. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“You’d probably implode,” Lily said with a smirk, earning a laugh from Mia.

As they finished their pizza, Mia felt a little lighter, though the weight of her conflicted emotions still lingered. She knew Lily was right—she had to confront her feelings for Jason once and for all. But how? That was a question she didn’t have an answer to yet.

**Chapter 14: A Gesture of Love**

Mia sat curled up on her couch, aimlessly flipping through a magazine. The words blurred together as her thoughts raced. The past few days had been a whirlwind of emotions, leaving her feeling unsettled. She had avoided Victor after the dinner at his place, unsure of how to face him. It wasn’t his fault—it was hers. Her unresolved feelings for Jason weighed heavily on her, making her feel like she was being unfair to the man who had been nothing but kind and patient with her.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a soft knock at the door. She hesitated for a moment, her heart thudding in her chest, before getting up to answer it. When she opened the door, she was greeted by the sight of Victor standing there, holding a beautiful bouquet of white lilies and red roses.

“Hi,” he said, his voice warm and soothing. His smile, with those irresistible dimples, sent a wave of guilt and longing through her.

“Victor,” she whispered, her voice barely audible. “These are beautiful.”

“I missed you,” he said simply, his eyes locking with hers. “And I wanted to see you.”

She stepped aside to let him in, her heart pounding. “You didn’t have to go through the trouble.”

“It’s not trouble,” he said, placing the bouquet on the table. “I just wanted to do something to make you smile.”

Mia felt tears prick her eyes at his sincerity. He always had a way of making her feel cherished, and she hated herself for not being able to give him the same in return—at least not fully.

Victor looked around the room, his eyes landing on the messy bookshelf in the corner. “Looks like you’ve been busy,” he said with a teasing grin.

She followed his gaze and laughed nervously. “Not really. It’s been like that for weeks.”

“Well,” he said, rolling up his sleeves, “why don’t I help you with it?”

“You don’t have to do that, Victor,” she said, shaking her head.

“I want to,” he insisted, already walking toward the shelf.

As he started arranging the books, Mia sat back down, watching him. He moved with a quiet confidence, his broad shoulders flexing as he worked. He was dressed casually in a light blue button-up shirt and dark jeans, but somehow, he looked effortlessly handsome. She found herself staring, unable to tear her eyes away from him.

Victor turned suddenly, catching her in the act.

He smiled, his dimples on full display. “What?”

Mia blushed, shaking her head. “Nothing. Just... thank you.”

“For organizing your books?” he teased.

“For being you,” she said, her voice soft.

Victor walked over to her, brushing a strand of hair behind her ear. He leaned down and kissed her forehead, a gesture so tender it made her heart ache. “You’re worth it,” he said simply.

Mia felt tears sting her eyes, but she blinked them away, forcing a smile. How could she ever hurt this man? How could she tell him that she still thought about Jason, that her heart was caught in a storm of conflicting emotions? She couldn’t.

Victor stepped back, clapping his hands together. “Alright, go get dressed. Let’s grab some lunch and maybe catch a movie.”

Mia blinked, surprised. “You planned this?”

“Not really,” he admitted with a grin. “But I figured we could both use a little fun. What do you say?”

She hesitated for a moment before nodding. “Let me change into something decent.”

As she walked to her bedroom, she stole one last glance at Victor, who was now admiring his work on the bookshelf. He turned and caught her looking again, flashing that dimpled smile that melted her heart every time.

In that moment, Mia resolved to try harder—to push Jason out of her mind and focus on the man who was right in front of her. Because Victor didn’t deserve to be broken. And if anyone deserved her love, it was him.

**Chapter 15: The Mysterious Gift**

Mia’s day at work had been uneventful until her secretary, Carol, walked into her office with a mischievous smile and a neatly wrapped package in her hands.

“This just came in for you,” Carol announced, placing the package on Mia’s desk.

Mia raised an eyebrow. “From who?”

Carol shrugged, still grinning. “No name. Just a note attached.”

Mia’s curiosity piqued as she reached for the small envelope taped to the top of the box. The note inside read:

*"I’ll love you always."*

Her heart skipped a beat, and her lips curved into a soft smile. She assumed it had to be Victor. It was such a Victor thing to do—quietly thoughtful and romantic. She felt a flutter of excitement as she carefully unwrapped the package.

Inside was her favorite perfume, the one she had casually mentioned to Victor weeks ago. She held the bottle up, its familiar scent already tickling her memory.

“Oh, Mia,” Carol teased, leaning on the edge of the desk. “He’s a keeper! Sending you gifts at work like this? You’re one lucky lady.”

Mia blushed, her smile deepening. “Yeah, I guess I am.”

“You don’t guess,” Carol quipped with a wink. “You know.”

Mia laughed lightly and waved her hand dismissively. “Alright, back to work. Thank you for bringing this in.”

Carol nodded and left the office, her cheerful demeanor lingering like a warm breeze.

Alone again, Mia sat back in her chair, turning the perfume bottle in her hands. It was such a sweet gesture, and she felt a sudden wave of affection for Victor. He had always been considerate, always looking for little ways to make her feel special.

She thought about texting him a thank you but decided against it. This deserved a more personal touch. She would surprise him at his place after work, thank him in person, and maybe even spend the night. The thought filled her with a mix of anticipation and nervousness.

That evening, Mia drove to Victor’s apartment, the perfume bottle safely tucked into her bag. When he opened the door, his face lit up with a smile that made her heart flutter.

“Hey, you,” he said, pulling her into a warm hug.

“Hey,” she replied, stepping inside. “I came to thank you for the gift. It was really sweet of you.”

Victor frowned slightly, confusion flickering in his eyes. “Gift? What gift?”

Mia froze, her heart dropping. “The perfume. You didn’t send it?”

Victor shook his head slowly. “No, I didn’t. But it’s nice that someone thought of you.”

Her stomach churned as realization hit her. It wasn’t Victor—it had to be Jason. Her fingers tightened around the strap of her bag as she tried to mask her unease.

Victor, ever perceptive, noticed the shift in her expression. “Mia, are you okay?”

She forced a smile, nodding quickly. “Yeah, I’m fine. It’s just... I assumed it was from you.”

Victor chuckled, brushing it off. “Well, whoever sent it has good taste. You deserve to be spoiled, Mia.”

His easygoing response only made her feel worse. He was so understanding, so trusting, and yet here she was, caught in the middle of a situation she had brought upon herself.

As Victor walked into the kitchen to grab a drink, Mia sank onto the couch, her mind racing. Jason’s note, his gift—it wasn’t just a gift. It was a message, a reminder of the connection they once shared.

Victor returned with two glasses of wine, handing one to her. “Here’s to a good evening,” he said, raising his glass.

Mia clinked her glass against his, forcing herself to focus on the present moment. But as they sipped their wine and chatted, her thoughts kept drifting back to Jason.

She hated how much space he still occupied in her mind, how he could upend her day with a simple gesture. And she hated that Victor, kind and wonderful Victor, had to share her heart with a ghost from her past.

That night, as Victor kissed her goodnight and held her close, Mia felt an ache of guilt deep in her chest. She knew she needed to make a choice soon, not just for Victor’s sake, but for her own. Because living in the past was no way to build a future.

**Chapter 16: Jason’s Games**

Mia was immersed in reviewing a stack of reports on her desk when Carol walked into her office with a familiar grin and another package in hand.

“Another one for you,” Carol announced, placing the neatly wrapped box on Mia’s desk.

Mia’s heart sank. She didn’t need to ask who it was from. She already knew.

Carol tilted her head, her smile widening. “Still no name on it. Whoever this admirer is, they’re persistent.”

Mia forced a smile, hoping to mask her irritation. “Thanks, Carol. I’ll take care of it.”

Carol lingered for a moment, curiosity dancing in her eyes. But Mia’s expression gave her no room for further questions. With a knowing nod, Carol excused herself.

The moment the door closed, Mia sighed and pushed the package aside. She didn’t bother unwrapping it. Instead, she reached for her phone and dialed the number she knew all too well.

Jason picked up on the second ring. “Mia,” he said, his voice warm and familiar, sending an involuntary shiver down her spine.

“Why are you sending me gifts, Jason?” she asked without preamble, her tone sharp.

There was a brief pause on the other end. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Jason replied, feigning innocence.

“Don’t play games with me,” Mia snapped. “You know exactly what I’m talking about. The perfume, the note, and now this.”

Jason sighed, his voice softening. “Fine. It’s me. But it’s just a peace offering, Mia. Nothing more. You don’t have to overthink it.”

Her grip on the phone tightened. “A peace offering? And the notes? ‘I’ll love you always’? That’s harmless?”

“It’s just a sentiment,” Jason said smoothly. “No hidden agenda. You always overanalyze things.”

Mia closed her eyes, trying to steady her breathing. “Jason, I’ve moved on. Victor—”

“Victor doesn’t have to know,” Jason interrupted, his voice dripping with charm. “It’s just a couple of gifts, Mia. Remember when I used to surprise you with little things like this? You loved it.”

The memories came rushing back despite her attempts to block them out. She remembered the flowers, the jewelry, the handwritten notes he used to leave in her bag. Jason had always been good at gestures, at making her feel special in the smallest ways.

Before she knew it, a soft chuckle escaped her lips. “You haven’t changed, have you?”

Jason laughed lightly on the other end, the sound disarming her further. “Not where it counts. And neither have you, Mia. You’re still that beautiful, vibrant woman I fell in love with.”

“Stop it,” she said, her voice weaker now.

“What? Telling the truth?” Jason replied smoothly. “Come on, Mia. You can’t tell me you don’t miss how things used to be.”

Mia found herself laughing again despite her resolve. He had always been able to break down her walls with his words, his charm, and that maddening confidence.

Their conversation flowed easily after that, like no time had passed. Jason asked about her work, her family, and even Victor—though there was a faint edge of mockery when he said his name. Mia tried to keep the conversation light, but she could feel the undertone of nostalgia pulling her in.

Finally, she glanced at the clock and saw the time. A client was waiting for her. She cleared her throat, forcing herself to regain control.

“Jason, I have to go. Someone’s waiting for me,” she said firmly.

“Alright,” he said, his tone playful. “But don’t pretend you didn’t enjoy our little chat.”

Mia rolled her eyes, though a smile tugged at her lips. “Goodbye, Jason.”

“Goodbye, Mia,” he said, his voice lingering in her ear even after she ended the call.

As she placed the phone back on her desk, she stared at the unopened package, her thoughts swirling. Jason had a way of pulling her back in, of making her question everything.

But she couldn’t let him win. Not this time.

Straightening her posture, Mia stood, smoothing her skirt and preparing to meet her client. She needed to focus on the present, not the past. Yet as she walked out of her office, a tiny voice in her head whispered that the battle was far from over.

**Chapter 17: "Mia Is Mine"**

Victor sat in his usual spot at the bar, nursing a glass of whiskey while Daniel and Desmond joked about their week. The boys’ night out had become a regular ritual, but tonight Victor’s mind was heavy. He sipped his drink in silence, barely reacting to Daniel’s latest outrageous dating story.

“Victor, what’s up, man?” Desmond asked, nudging him lightly. “You’ve been quiet all evening. Don’t tell me the honeymoon phase with Mia is over already.”

Victor smiled faintly. “No, things are good,” he replied. “Really good.”

“Good doesn’t sound convincing,” Daniel interjected, leaning closer. “Spill it. What’s going on?”

Victor hesitated, swirling the amber liquid in his glass. He wasn’t sure if he should mention the gifts. Would it sound petty? But the unease had been gnawing at him, and he needed their advice.

“There’s something,” Victor admitted. “Mia’s been getting these gifts at work. No name, but…”

Daniel raised an eyebrow, already jumping to conclusions. “It’s Jason, isn’t it?”

Victor’s face fell. He hadn’t wanted to say it out loud, but hearing Jason’s name made his chest tighten.

“Why would you say that?” Desmond asked, frowning at Daniel.

“Come on, we all know the guy still has a thing for her,” Daniel said, waving his hand dismissively. “It’s obvious. Showing up at the wedding like that? Classic ex trying to mark his territory.”

Desmond shook his head. “You’re not helping, Daniel.” Turning to Victor, he said, “Look, man, Mia chose you. She’s with you now. Whatever Jason’s trying to do, it doesn’t change that.”

Victor nodded, though Desmond’s words did little to ease his mind. “I know she’s with me,” he said. “But...it’s not just about being together. It’s about where her heart really is. And I’m not sure I’m winning there.”

Daniel leaned back in his chair, his expression softening for once. “Mia loves you, dude. I can tell. She’s not the type to play games. Jason’s probably just trying to stir up trouble because he regrets losing her.”

“But what if…” Victor trailed off, his voice barely above a whisper. “What if he’s right? What if I’m just the guy she’s settling for?”

The table fell silent, the weight of Victor’s words hanging in the air. Desmond reached over and patted his shoulder.

“Listen to me, Victor,” Desmond said. “Mia isn’t settling for anyone. You’ve been there for her, you’ve shown her love and care. That counts for more than anything Jason could try to pull.”

Daniel nodded in agreement. “Desmond’s right. You’re a good guy, Victor. And honestly, if Mia doesn’t see that, then she doesn’t deserve you. But I think she does.”

Victor offered them a grateful smile, but deep down, the doubts lingered. He couldn’t shake the feeling that he was fighting a battle he wasn’t equipped to win.

While the others continued their banter, Victor pulled out his phone and stared at the wallpaper: a candid photo of Mia laughing during one of their dates. Her eyes sparkled, her smile was radiant, and her whole presence seemed to light up the screen.

He smiled to himself, his heart swelling with love. Mia wasn’t just beautiful—she was kind, gentle, and full of life. She had a way of grounding him, of making him feel like the best version of himself.

“She’s mine,” Victor murmured under his breath, so softly that the others didn’t hear him.

But even as he made that vow, a flicker of fear remained. Because he knew one thing for sure: Jason wasn’t going to give up easily.

**Chapter 18: "Caught in the Act"**

Mia was deep into her paperwork when her secretary, Carol, buzzed in through the intercom.

“Ma’am, there’s someone here to see you,” Carol said in a cheerful tone.

Mia frowned, not expecting anyone. “Who is it?”

“It’s Jason,” Carol replied after a slight pause.

Mia’s heart skipped a beat. “Send him in,” she said reluctantly, already regretting it.

Moments later, Jason strolled into her office with his usual confident swagger, a boyish smile lighting up his face. Dressed sharply in a fitted blazer and jeans, he looked every bit as charming as she remembered, and that infuriated her.

“Jason, what are you doing here?” she asked, her tone sharp as she closed the folder in front of her.

“I came to see you, obviously,” he replied, settling into the chair opposite her desk.

“You shouldn’t be here,” Mia snapped. “This is my workplace, Jason. I told you to stop showing up like this. It’s inappropriate.”

Jason leaned back in his chair, unbothered by her anger. “You don’t answer my calls. You don’t reply to my texts. What choice did I have?”

Mia glared at him. “The choice to respect my boundaries.”

Jason smiled faintly, unshaken. “Boundaries,” he repeated, as if the word was foreign to him. “Mia, you and I both know those don’t exist when it comes to us.”

She opened her mouth to argue, but Jason stood and walked around her desk, his presence suddenly overwhelming. Mia stiffened in her seat, her heart pounding.

“Jason,” she warned, but her voice was weaker now, betraying her resolve.

He stopped inches away from her, towering over her as he reached out and tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear. His fingers grazed her skin, sending shivers down her spine.

“You still get that look in your eyes when you’re angry,” Jason said softly, his eyes locking onto hers. “I missed that.”

“Stop,” Mia whispered, her breath hitching.

Jason leaned closer, his lips dangerously near hers. The scent of his cologne clouded her thoughts, and for a moment, she was transported back to the nights they spent together, his touch, his kiss, his everything.

But just as Jason’s lips brushed hers, the door swung open.

“Mia, I—” Victor’s voice froze mid-sentence.

Jason stepped back, a smug smirk forming on his face as he turned to see who had interrupted them.

Victor stood at the door, holding a takeout bag in one hand. His expression shifted from surprise to hurt in an instant, his jaw tightening.

Mia jumped to her feet, her face pale. “Victor, this isn’t what it looks like—”

“It’s exactly what it looks like,” Jason interjected casually, sliding his hands into his pockets.

Victor’s eyes darted between the two of them, lingering on Mia. He didn’t say a word; he didn’t need to. The pain in his eyes was enough to cut through Mia like a knife.

“I’m sorry for interrupting,” Victor muttered, his voice barely audible. He turned and walked out of the office before Mia could stop him.

“Victor!” she called, rushing after him.

Jason shrugged and adjusted his jacket. “I’ll let you two lovebirds sort this out,” he said with a smirk before heading for the door.

Mia caught up with Victor just as he reached the elevator. “Victor, please, let me explain.”

Victor turned to her, his expression unreadable. He handed her the takeout bag. “You said you hadn’t eaten, so I thought I’d surprise you,” he said flatly.

Mia felt her throat tighten. “Victor, I—”

He raised a hand to stop her. “We’ll talk later, Mia. Right now, I need to process this.”

Before she could respond, the elevator doors opened, and Victor stepped inside. He didn’t look back as the doors closed, leaving Mia standing in the hallway, clutching the bag of food he had brought for her.

Tears pricked at her eyes as she returned to her office. Jason was gone, leaving behind an air of smug satisfaction that lingered like a bad memory.

As she sat down, staring at the uneaten meal Victor had brought, the weight of her choices began to suffocate her. Mia knew she was standing on the edge of a cliff, and one wrong step could shatter everything she had built with Victor.

**Chapter 19: "Fix It Yourself"**

Mia sat on the couch in Lily’s apartment, clutching a throw pillow tightly. Her face was pale, her eyes puffy from the tears she had cried since Victor left her office. She had called Lily immediately after the incident, knowing she needed her best friend's guidance.

Lily walked in from the kitchen with two mugs of tea, setting one down in front of Mia before sitting across from her. Her expression was stony, her disappointment clear.

“Start talking,” Lily said coldly, crossing her arms.

Mia sighed deeply. “Jason came to my office today.”

“Why?” Lily snapped, her voice sharp.

“I don’t know,” Mia replied, her voice barely a whisper. “He said I wasn’t answering his calls or texts, so he thought he’d show up.”

Lily shook her head in disbelief. “And you let him in?”

“I didn’t have a choice!” Mia exclaimed. “Carol already sent him in before I could stop her.”

Lily’s gaze hardened. “And then what? He sweet-talked you? Got too close? Let me guess—Victor walked in at the worst possible moment?”

Mia nodded, her hands trembling. “It wasn’t like that, Lily. I tried to keep my distance, but Jason has this... way of getting through to me. I don’t know how to explain it.”

“You don’t need to explain it,” Lily said, her tone biting. “I already know. You let him. That’s what it is. You let him.”

Mia’s head dropped, shame washing over her.

“Do you even realize what you’re doing to Victor?” Lily continued, her voice rising with frustration. “He doesn’t deserve this, Mia. He’s been nothing but good to you. And you’re over here entertaining your ex? Are you trying to ruin everything?”

“I’m not trying to ruin anything!” Mia protested. “I love Victor!”

“Do you?” Lily challenged, leaning forward. “Because from where I’m standing, it doesn’t look like it. You’re stuck in this toxic cycle with Jason, and it’s killing your relationship. You need to decide, Mia. Right now. Who do you want? Jason or Victor? And this time, it has to be final.”

Mia sat silently, the weight of Lily’s words sinking in.

“Victor met you through me,” Lily said, her voice breaking slightly. “I vouched for you. I told him how amazing you were, how kind and genuine you were. And now, I have to watch you hurt him? It’s not fair to him, and it’s not fair to me. Fix this, Mia. Fix it now.”

Mia’s eyes welled up with tears. “I don’t know how to fix it. Victor won’t even answer my calls.”

“Can you blame him?” Lily shot back. “He walked in on you and Jason. What do you think he’s feeling right now? And honestly, I’m done helping you this time. You need to handle this on your own.”

Mia looked at Lily, pleading. “Please, Lily, I need you.”

Lily shook her head firmly. “No, Mia. Not this time. If you want Victor, if you truly love him, then you need to prove it to him. Not through me, not through words, but through your actions.”

Mia nodded slowly, her mind racing. She realized Lily was right. Jason was a figment of her past, a fantasy she had held onto for too long. Victor was her reality, her present, and the one who made her truly happy.

Reaching for her phone, Mia dialed Victor’s number. It rang and rang, but he didn’t pick up. Her heart sank.

“He’s not answering,” she said, her voice trembling. “What if I’ve lost him for good?”

Lily didn’t respond, her expression firm and unmoving.

“What do I do?” Mia whispered, her voice breaking.

“You fix it,” Lily said simply. “Alone. That’s what you do.”

Mia knew there was no escaping this. If she wanted Victor back, she had to show him that he was the one she wanted. No more excuses, no more Jason. It was time to fight for the man she loved.

As she sat there, tears streaming down her face, she vowed to herself that she would make things right. Even if it took everything she had.

**Chapter 20: "Space Between Us"**

Mia paced her living room, her phone clutched tightly in her hand. She had been trying to reach Victor for hours, but every call went straight to voicemail. Her heart felt like it was being squeezed in a vice, and the silence on the other end of the line was unbearable. She needed to talk to him, to make him understand. But he was shutting her out, and it was tearing her apart.

Frustrated, Mia scrolled through her contacts and found Daniel’s number. If anyone could help her reach Victor, it would be him. She pressed the call button and held her breath as the line rang.

“Hello?” Daniel’s familiar, upbeat voice answered.

“Daniel, it’s Mia,” she said quickly, her voice shaky. “I need your help. Is Victor with you?”

There was a pause on the other end. “Uh, yeah, he’s here,” Daniel admitted cautiously. “But I don’t think he’s in the mood to talk right now.”

“Please, Daniel,” Mia begged. “I just need to speak with him for a few minutes. I need to fix this.”

Daniel sighed. “Mia, he’s pretty upset. I’m not sure if he even wants to hear from you.”

“I know I’ve hurt him,” she said, her voice cracking. “But I need to make things right. Please, Daniel. Just put him on the line.”

After a long silence, Daniel finally relented. “Alright. Hold on.”

Mia heard muffled voices in the background, followed by a heavy sigh. Then Victor’s voice came on the line, low and guarded.

“What do you want, Mia?” he asked, his tone void of its usual warmth.

Mia’s heart sank at the coldness in his voice. “Victor, I’m so sorry,” she began. “I never meant to hurt you. Nothing happened between Jason and me. You have to believe me.”

Victor let out a bitter laugh. “Nothing happened? I walked in on him practically leaning in to kiss you, Mia. You can’t expect me to just brush that off.”

“It wasn’t what it looked like,” she insisted. “I told him to stop. I told him to leave. You have to believe me, Victor.”

“Even if that’s true,” Victor said, his voice heavy with emotion, “it doesn’t change the fact that you’ve let Jason linger in your life. You’ve been giving him space he shouldn’t have, and it’s hurting us.”

Mia’s eyes filled with tears. “I know, and I’m so sorry. I’ve made mistakes, but I swear to you, I’ve made my decision. I want you, Victor. I choose you.”

Victor’s silence on the other end was deafening. Finally, he spoke, his voice firm but pained. “Mia, I’m glad you’ve made your choice, but I need space. And honestly, I think you do too. You need time to really sort through your feelings, without Jason clouding your judgment.”

“But I don’t need space,” Mia pleaded. “I need you. Please, Victor. Don’t do this.”

Victor sighed deeply. “I love you, Mia. But I can’t keep putting myself in a position where I feel like I’m competing with your past. It’s not fair to either of us. Take the time to figure out what you really want. And if it’s me, then we’ll talk. But right now, I can’t do this.”

Mia’s tears fell harder as she realized the depth of Victor’s hurt. She tried to argue, but Victor cut her off. “Mia, I need to go.”

“Victor, please—” she started, but the line went dead.

Victor lowered his phone and placed it on the table, his hands trembling. His heart felt like it was breaking in two. He leaned back against the couch, his eyes glazing over as he stared at nothing in particular. Daniel, sitting across from him, watched his friend with concern.

“You okay, man?” Daniel asked cautiously.

Victor didn’t answer immediately. Then, without warning, his shoulders shook, and tears spilled down his cheeks. Daniel was taken aback.

“Whoa, whoa,” Daniel said, shifting uncomfortably. “Hey, no offense, but crying? Not exactly the manliest move here.”

Victor wiped at his eyes, but the tears kept coming. “I don’t care,” he said, his voice breaking. “It’s Mia. I love her, Daniel. I love her so much, and it’s killing me.”

Daniel sighed, running a hand through his hair. “Look, man, there are plenty of other girls out there—better girls, even. You don’t have to put yourself through this for one woman.”

Victor shook his head. “It’s not just any woman. It’s Mia. She’s everything to me. Her smile, her laugh, the way she lights up a room—it’s her, Daniel. It’s always been her.”

Daniel exchanged a look with Desmond, who had been silently observing from the corner. Desmond stepped forward and patted Victor on the shoulder.

“She’ll come around, Vic,” Desmond said. “If she really loves you, she’ll find a way to make this right.”

Victor looked down at his phone, Mia’s name still displayed on the screen. He swallowed hard and whispered to himself, “Mia is mine.”

**Chapter 21: "The Final Call"**

Mia sat on her couch, her hands trembling as she held her phone. Her conversation with Victor still lingered in her mind, but she knew she needed to close the Jason chapter of her life for good. Taking a deep breath, she scrolled to Jason’s contact and pressed the call button. She had rehearsed her words a hundred times in her head; it was time to finally say them out loud.

The phone rang several times before someone answered, but it wasn’t Jason.

“Hello?” a sharp female voice barked.

Mia froze for a moment. “Um, hello. Can I speak to Jason, please?” she asked cautiously.

“Who’s this?” Cassie demanded, her tone already hostile.

“It’s Mia,” she replied, trying to keep her voice calm.

Cassie scoffed loudly. “Of course, it’s you. What do you want, Mia? Haven’t you done enough already?”

Mia took a deep breath. “I didn’t call to cause any trouble. I just need to speak to Jason. It’s important.”

“Important?” Cassie sneered. “You mean like ruining people’s lives? Let me make this clear: Jason is mine now. You need to back off and stop clinging to something that’s already over.”

Mia felt her patience wearing thin, but she refused to stoop to Cassie’s level. “Cassie, I’m not trying to interfere in your relationship. I was calling to tell Jason that it’s over. It has been over for a long time. I’m moving on.”

Cassie wasn’t convinced. “Oh, please! Do you think I’m stupid? You’re just saying that because you can’t stand the fact that he’s with me now.”

Mia sighed, realizing this conversation was going nowhere. “Look, I don’t want to argue with you. Just let Jason know I called.”

“Don’t bother calling again,” Cassie snapped. “Stay out of our lives.”

Before Mia could respond, she ended the call. Mia stared at her phone, frustration and sadness welling up inside her. She shook her head, reminding herself that she had done what she could. There was no point in engaging further.

Meanwhile, at Jason’s apartment, he stepped out of the bathroom, a towel wrapped around his waist. He noticed Cassie sitting on the bed, his phone clutched tightly in her hand.

“Who was that?” he asked, drying his hair with another towel.

“No one,” Cassie said quickly. “Just a wrong number.”

Jason’s eyes narrowed. He didn’t believe her. He walked over and grabbed his phone from her hand. Scrolling through the call log, he saw Mia’s name and his expression darkened.

“Why did you answer Mia’s call?” he demanded.

Cassie stood up, her face flushed with anger. “Why is she even calling you, Jason? And why do you care so much that I picked up? It’s always about Mia, isn’t it?”

Jason’s jaw tightened. “That’s not the point. You had no right to answer my phone.”

Cassie’s voice rose. “And you have no right to keep putting her above me! I’m your girlfriend, Jason. I’ve been patient, but I can’t do this anymore. It’s me or Mia. Choose!”

Jason stared at her, his face unreadable. He didn’t say a word. Instead, he turned around, put on his clothes, and walked out of the apartment, slamming the door behind him.

Cassie stood there, stunned and devastated. Tears streamed down her face as she realized that once again, Jason had chosen to avoid the confrontation rather than reassure her. She sank onto the bed, her hands trembling as she wiped at her cheeks. For the first time, she wondered if holding onto Jason was worth the pain it caused her.

Jason sat at the bar, nursing a glass of whiskey that had long since lost its chill. His mind raced with the thought of Mia.

He reached for his phone again, his thumb hovering over her name in his contacts. The impulse to hear her voice one last time was too strong to ignore. He pressed the call button and waited. Three rings. Then, a click, and Mia’s voice filled the line, soft yet firm.

“Hello, Jason.”

He exhaled a breath he didn’t know he was holding. “Mia… I’m sorry. If Cassie said anything hurtful to you, I—”

“No, Jason.” Mia interrupted, her voice steady. “I’m not calling because of her. I’m calling because I need you to understand something.” She paused, as if collecting her thoughts. “I’m over you. I’m done.”

Jason’s chest tightened. “Mia, don’t—”

“Listen to me,” she cut him off. “Cassie’s feelings are valid. I won’t argue that. But what I’m telling you now is the truth. I’ve moved on. I’m with Victor, and I realized that I love him. I don’t want you calling me, texting me, gifting me, or showing up at my door. I don’t want anything to do with you anymore.”

Jason felt the sting of her words like a slap. His heart pounded in his chest. “Mia, you’re just confused. You don’t love him. You love me. You’ve always loved me.”

Mia laughed softly, but it was devoid of any humor. “No, Jason. I loved you, but I’ve let that go. I’m not going back. I’m not coming back to you, and I’m not allowing you to keep holding onto something that’s over.” Her voice became firm, resolute. “Focus on your relationship with Cassie. Let me go.”

Jason wanted to argue, to plead for another chance, but the finality in her voice left him speechless. “Mia… I…”

“Goodbye, Jason.” Her words were cold, but they felt like a weight being lifted from her shoulders.

The line went dead.

Mia stared at her phone for a long moment after the call ended. Her heart was racing, but it wasn’t from sadness or longing. It was anger. Anger at how Jason had treated her, at how he had tried to hold onto something long past its time.

But it wasn’t just anger. It was freedom. She felt as if a weight had been lifted off her chest, a burden she hadn’t realized she’d been carrying until now. For the first time in what felt like forever, she didn’t feel the crushing heaviness of regret or confusion. She didn’t feel that all-consuming pull toward someone who had never truly seen her.

Mia set her phone down on the kitchen counter and closed her eyes for a moment. She let the silence settle over her, allowing the rush of freedom to fully sink in.

It was done. She was done. With Jason. With the past.

Her mind shifted to Victor. The man who had been by her side, who had seen her for who she was and loved her anyway. The man who had never tried to hold her back or manipulate her emotions. The man who deserved her, just as much as she deserved him.

Mia knew what she had to do now. It was time to make things right with Victor. It was time to stop running from what she wanted, what she needed. And what she needed was to build a future with him.

For the first time, Mia felt completely at peace with herself. Jason was in the past. And with that, she turned to the future, to the man who had always been there, waiting for her to see the truth.

**Chapter 22: A Night of Love**

Victor entered his apartment, his tired eyes scanning the room, but the moment he stepped through the door, the familiar warmth of home wrapped around him. The air was filled with the tantalizing scent of something delicious, and his stomach grumbled in response. His eyes followed the aroma to the kitchen, where Mia stood, dressed in a sexy bum shirt and a white top he had gifted her not long ago. She was moving around gracefully, stirring something on the stove while setting the dining table with care.

A smile tugged at the corners of Victor's mouth as Mia glanced over her shoulder and caught sight of him. She immediately brightened, her eyes lighting up as she walked toward him.

"Hey, you," she greeted him with a radiant smile, her arms wrapping around his neck in a warm embrace. As they hugged, she pressed a soft kiss to his lips, and his heart skipped a beat.

"Welcome home," she said as she gently took his bag from his shoulder and set it aside. "Go freshen up and come down for dinner. It's all ready."

Victor couldn't help but smile, seeing his girlfriend back to her usual self—strong, loving, and full of life. The thought of how far they'd come, how far she’d come, filled him with overwhelming gratitude. The past weeks of uncertainty seemed to melt away, leaving only the person he’d fallen for standing before him.

"Why all this?" he asked, eyes roaming over the carefully set table, the glistening Jollof rice that filled the air with its sweet aroma.

Mia gave him a playful wink. "I thought I’d spoil you tonight," she teased, her voice soft but affectionate. "Go on, freshen up. Dinner’s waiting."

Victor did as she asked, eager to get back to her. As he returned downstairs, the two of them sat together, the intimate atmosphere of the room making the evening feel even more special.

After dinner, as they lingered at the table, Mia’s mood shifted. She took his hands in hers, her gaze soft and sincere. "Victor," she started, her voice low and serious. "I owe you an apology. For everything. The confusion, the distance... when Jason came back to town, I lost sight of what truly mattered. And that was you."

Victor’s heart swelled with love for her. "Mia, you don’t need to apologize. We’ve been through a lot, and I’ve always been here. I’m not going anywhere."

"I know," she said, her eyes glistening with sincerity. "But I needed to say it. And I needed you to know that I love you. More than anything. You’re it for me. I promise you that—it’s you and me, forever. I’m never leaving you."

Victor’s chest tightened with joy, his heart overflowing. He leaned toward her, his lips capturing hers in a gentle kiss. The kiss quickly deepened, igniting a fire between them. It was as if the world had melted away, leaving only the two of them in this moment of perfect connection.

Without breaking the kiss, Victor scooped Mia off her feet, carrying her effortlessly to his bedroom. They fell onto the bed, and the passion between them flared, their bodies moving in perfect synchrony. Mia surrendered to him completely, knowing in that instant that this was everything she needed, everything she’d been searching for. Victor was the one.

As they collapsed, spent and tangled in each other's arms, sleep overtook them both. The night was peaceful, the love they shared filling the space between them like an unspoken promise.

Hours later, Mia stirred, waking to find herself nestled in the warmth of Victor’s embrace. She gazed down at him, admiring the peaceful expression on his face. A wave of tenderness washed over her as she reached out, brushing a stray lock of hair from his forehead. She leaned in to kiss him lightly, but as her lips hovered near his skin, Victor’s eyes fluttered open.

He smiled at her—such a simple gesture, yet it caused her heart to flutter in ways she couldn’t explain. The way he looked at her, the way he loved her, made her feel like the luckiest woman alive.

"Good morning," he whispered softly.

Mia smiled, her heart full. She wrapped herself closer to him, the duvet cocooning them as they drifted back into peaceful sleep, content and wrapped in the love they had finally found.

**Chapter 23: A Perfect Saturday**

The morning after their passionate night, Mia and Victor woke up in a state of complete contentment. The world outside felt distant as they spent the entire day together, basking in the peaceful intimacy that had blossomed between them.

They started the day with simple, shared tasks. Mia and Victor moved through the house, side by side, handling the chores that always seemed to pile up. There was something satisfying about doing it all together. Whether it was vacuuming, washing the dishes, or folding the laundry, they shared laughter, light teasing, and a sense of harmony. The morning passed in a warm blur of shared smiles and easy companionship.

Afterward, they cooked breakfast together. Mia had made her signature pancakes, and Victor scrambled the eggs. They joked around as they cooked, enjoying each other’s company. Sitting down at the table with their breakfast, they exchanged loving glances, feeling that unspoken connection that had only deepened over time.

Once breakfast was done, they couldn’t resist the idea of spending the rest of the day lounging together. They decided to take a long, relaxing bath. The warm water soothed them as they joked and talked about everything and nothing at all. It felt so effortless, so comfortable—like they had found their perfect rhythm.

After their bath, they settled on the couch, wrapped in soft towels, ready to enjoy a movie marathon. They picked their favorites, laughing and teasing each other over the plot twists. For hours, they were lost in their own little world, enjoying the simple joy of being with one another.

But just as Mia was resting her head on Victor’s shoulder, the doorbell rang, cutting into the serenity of their day.

Victor hesitated, then reluctantly stood up, stretching. "I’ll get it."

Mia smiled, watching him go. She didn’t mind the interruption—after all, she was still wrapped up in the happiness of the day. When Victor opened the door, he found Daniel and Desmond standing there, grinning ear to ear.

"Yo, Victor!" Daniel greeted, stepping in with a wink. "Got the snacks for the match."

Desmond followed, chuckling. "Didn’t know we were interrupting such a… happy mood." He eyed the grin on Victor’s face and immediately raised an eyebrow.

Victor couldn’t hide the smile that was plastered on his face. "Hey, guys," he greeted them, trying to act nonchalant. But the glint in his eyes told them everything they needed to know.

"Well, well," Daniel said, nudging Desmond. "Looks like someone had a good night."

Victor couldn’t help but laugh. He leaned in the doorway, not ashamed of his happiness. "Yeah, yeah. You guys want to watch the match or what?"

As they walked past him, heading inside, Mia stood up from the couch to greet them. She smiled warmly at both of them. "Hey, guys," she said, her voice cheerful as always.

Before heading into the other room, she walked over to Victor, standing on tiptoe to kiss him quickly on the lips. As she pulled away, she winked playfully at Daniel and Desmond, who both looked slightly taken aback by their public display of affection. They exchanged a look, amused by how much the two of them seemed to be in their own bubble.

Mia gave a little laugh, teasing them with her playful gesture, before retreating to the bedroom to make a quick phone call.

On the other end of the line, Lily answered immediately, sensing the excitement in Mia’s voice.

"Hey, girl," Mia greeted her. "You will not believe what happened last night. It’s all official now."

Lily squealed with delight on the other end of the line. "Ooh, I knew it! Tell me everything! How was it?"

Mia laughed softly, the memory of last night bringing a warmth to her chest. "It was perfect, Lily. Absolutely perfect. I feel like I’m finally where I belong." She paused, a smile curling at her lips as she remembered how it all unfolded. "Victor and I are good now. Better than ever. And I’m never letting him go."

Lily’s voice was full of joy. "I’m so happy for you, Mia. You’ve made the right choice. I’m so proud of you for picking him. You two belong together."

Mia’s eyes twinkled as she shifted the conversation. "I’m glad you’re happy, because I need you to come over. Join us! Spend the day with me and the guys. It’s going to be fun. We can watch the match together and hang out. What do you say?"

Lily giggled. "Oh my gosh, you’re such a goof. I’m in! Let me get ready and I’ll head over. I’ll bring some snacks."

"Perfect!" Mia replied, feeling giddy. "I’ll see you soon."

She hung up, a satisfied smile on her face. She couldn’t wait to spend more time with Victor, Daniel, Desmond, and now Lily. Her world had fallen into place, and today felt like the perfect start to the new chapter of her life with Victor.

As she rejoined the others in the living room, she couldn't help but feel that everything was right.

**Chapter 24: The Final Encounter**

Mia walked briskly through the mall, her mind preoccupied with the weekend she had spent in the comfort of Victor’s arms. Life felt light, free, and full of promise. She didn’t expect anything to ruin this sense of peace. But as she turned a corner, her heart dropped when she saw Jason standing by a store display.

He spotted her almost immediately, his eyes locking onto hers. A sickening feeling spread in the pit of her stomach as he approached, his face lighting up with a smile that Mia could no longer bring herself to trust.

"Mia!" Jason called out, his voice laced with false sweetness. He walked toward her with an eager stride, but Mia took a quick step back, instinctively trying to create distance between them.

She wasn’t about to let him intrude into her new life, not when she had worked so hard to move on. But Jason wasn’t backing down.

"Hey, hey, come on," he said, trying to sound casual. "I know things between us have been… messy, but can we talk for a second?"

Mia didn’t want to engage, but she knew it was inevitable. She couldn’t ignore him forever, especially in a public place like this. She sighed and crossed her arms, her patience running thin.

"You’ve got five minutes," she said coldly, her tone firm. "Say whatever you need to say."

Jason’s smile didn’t fade, but there was an edge to his voice now, as he tried to use his old charm. "I’ve been thinking about you, Mia. About everything. I know things got complicated, but we were good together, right? We could be good again."

Mia kept her distance, her expression resolute. "Jason, stop. We’re not getting back together. We’re over."

The words stung him, but he didn’t let it show. He persisted, his voice taking on a desperate edge. "You don’t have to act like this. I know you still care about me. You don’t really love Victor. You loved me, Mia. You always will."

Mia’s eyes hardened, the irritation in her chest rising. "No, Jason," she said, her voice low but filled with finality. "I don’t love you anymore. I loved you once, but I don’t anymore. And I love Victor. I love him even more than I ever loved you."

Jason’s jaw tightened. He hadn’t expected her to say that, and for a moment, his confidence faltered. He tried to hide his surprise, but it was clear he wasn’t getting through to her.

"I don’t know what kind of game you’re playing," Jason said, his voice tense, "but you’re just confused. You don’t really know what you want."

Mia stood tall, not backing down. "No, Jason. I know exactly what I want. And it’s not you. It’s never going to be you."

Her words hit him like a punch to the gut. For the first time in years, Jason realized he wasn’t the one in control anymore.

Mia leaned in slightly, her eyes fierce. "I’m happy now, with Victor. You don’t get to ruin that for me. If you don’t stay away, I’ll get a restraining order. I’ll do whatever it takes to keep you out of my life for good."

The finality of her words seemed to hang in the air, thick and suffocating. Jason’s face darkened, but he didn’t say anything more. He stood there for a long moment, trying to read the resolve in Mia’s eyes. But there was no doubt left in her gaze—she meant every word.

Mia turned to walk away, her heels clicking sharply against the polished floor. As she walked, she could feel Jason’s eyes on her, but she didn’t look back. She had said what needed to be said. And there was no turning back.

She couldn’t deny the small sense of relief that washed over her as she continued down the hallway, her heart lighter than it had been in a long time. Jason was no longer a part of her life. And Victor, the man who truly loved her, was everything she had ever wanted.

Her phone buzzed in her pocket, and she pulled it out, smiling when she saw Victor’s name on the screen. With one last glance in the direction of Jason, she answered the call.

"Hey," she said softly, her voice already filled with affection.

"Mia," Victor’s voice came through, warm and loving. "How’s your day going?"

Mia smiled, feeling her heart flutter just hearing his voice. "Better now," she said, her tone light. "I just had to get rid of some unwanted baggage."

Victor chuckled on the other end. "I’m glad to hear that. How about you come home and let me spoil you a little? I think you’ve earned it."

Mia’s smile widened as she replied, "I’d love that."

As she hung up the phone and continued walking, she couldn’t help but feel a deep sense of peace. Jason was in her past. And her future? It was with Victor.

**Chapter 25: The Proposal**

Mia was radiant as she entered the restaurant that evening. It was her birthday, and Victor had planned a special dinner just for the two of them. At least, that’s what she thought.

The atmosphere in the upscale restaurant was warm and inviting, with soft lighting casting a romantic glow over everything. Victor had been mysterious all day, but Mia wasn’t one to press him for details. She was simply excited to spend the evening with him.

As they walked through the entrance, Mia’s eyes lit up when she saw a familiar group of faces at the table. Lily, Daniel, and Desmond were all there, grinning as they waved enthusiastically. Mia blinked in surprise. "I thought this was just for us?" she said, turning to Victor with a playful smile.

Victor chuckled, giving her hand a reassuring squeeze. "It’s a surprise," he said softly, his voice filled with affection. "But I’m glad you’re happy to see them."

Mia laughed, feeling a warmth in her chest as she joined the table. It was nice to have her closest friends there, and she could see the joy on Victor’s face as he chatted with the others. The evening was off to a great start, filled with laughter, delicious food, and lively conversation. They all caught up with each other, and Mia couldn’t help but feel the love and connection in the air.

Dinner passed quickly, and as the plates were cleared away, Victor stood up. The chatter and laughter around the table quieted, and all eyes turned to him. Mia looked up, curious, but had no idea what was about to unfold.

Victor gave her a soft smile, the kind that made her heart skip a beat. "Mia," he began, his voice steady and filled with emotion, "I’ve been wanting to do something special for you. You’ve made me the happiest man alive, and I want to spend the rest of my life making you just as happy. I love you more than words can say."

Mia felt a lump form in her throat. Her heart pounded in her chest as she tried to hold back the tears that welled up. She didn’t know what was coming, but she could sense it was something important.

Victor dropped to one knee, and for a moment, time seemed to stand still. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small, velvet box, opening it to reveal a stunning ring that sparkled under the dim light.

"Mia," he said, his eyes locking onto hers, "will you marry me?"

The world seemed to pause. Mia’s breath caught in her throat as she stared at him, her mind racing. She didn’t have to think for long. Her heart had already made the decision. This was it. This was the moment she had been waiting for.

"Yes!" she exclaimed, her voice full of emotion. She quickly knelt beside him, wrapping her arms around him in a tight embrace as tears of joy streamed down her face. "Yes, I’ll marry you."

The table erupted into cheers, and Victor stood, lifting Mia into his arms. Their lips met in a passionate kiss, and the world around them seemed to fade away. It was just the two of them, lost in the magic of the moment.

As they pulled apart, still grinning, Mia noticed something that made her smile even wider. From across the table, she could see Daniel and Lily exchanging a shy glance, their faces flushed. The connection between them was undeniable, and Mia’s heart swelled with happiness for her best friend.

She whispered to Victor, her eyes twinkling. "I think we’re going to have another proposal to plan."

Victor’s grin widened as he caught on to what she meant. "Looks like it," he replied, his voice playful.

Desmond, who had been oblivious to the quiet exchange, looked up in confusion. "What? What are you two talking about?"

Mia and Victor exchanged knowing glances before gesturing toward Daniel and Lily. They were both blushing, trying to avoid eye contact, but it was clear they were smitten with each other.

Desmond’s eyes widened in realization. "Wait, what? Are you saying…?"

Mia nodded with a grin. "I think we’re going to have another proposal to plan."

Desmond raised his hands in mock frustration. "I’m the only single one left in this group, huh? Someone get me a girlfriend so I’m not the last man standing!"

The group burst into laughter, the lighthearted moment adding to the joy of the evening. Desmond mockingly pouted, but even he couldn’t resist the contagious happiness that filled the room.

The rest of the night passed in a blur of laughter, heartfelt congratulations, and celebratory toasts. As Mia looked around at the people she loved—Victor, Lily, Daniel, and Desmond—she knew that this was just the beginning of an incredible journey.

Victor was now her fiancé, and together, they were about to start a new chapter in their lives. The future felt bright, and she was ready to embrace it, surrounded by the people who mattered most.

As the night drew to a close, Mia and Victor shared one more kiss, knowing that their love story had only just begun.

**Chapter 26: The Bitter Truth**

Jason had been pacing outside Cassie’s house for what felt like an eternity. He had to make things right. He couldn’t stand the thought of losing her, not when everything had fallen apart with Mia. He had promised himself that if he could just apologize, maybe Cassie would take him back. He had convinced himself that she was still waiting for him, just like Mia had, despite everything that had happened.

His mind raced with all the things he needed to say as he rang the doorbell, heart pounding in his chest. Cassie had always been a big part of his life, and he didn’t know how to let go.

The door opened, and Cassie stood there, her expression neutral but distant. It stung. He’d been expecting something warmer, maybe even a hint of hope in her eyes. Instead, she simply looked at him, waiting for him to speak.

"Hey," Jason said, forcing a smile. "I know I messed up. I’m sorry for everything, Cass. I was stupid. But I’ve realized—I still care about you. I want to fix things. Can we just talk?"

Cassie sighed, stepping aside to let him in. "I’m listening," she said, her voice flat but polite.

As he entered, Jason felt a wave of nostalgia wash over him. The same furniture, the same photos, the same familiar scent of the place he had once called home. He tried to push aside the uncomfortable feeling rising in his chest, focusing on what mattered: Cassie. He needed to fix this.

But just as he started speaking again, a door in the back of the house creaked open. Jason’s eyes snapped to the figure emerging from the bedroom.

It was a man—tall, muscular, and wearing nothing but his underwear. Jason’s heart skipped a beat, his eyes widening in disbelief. His gaze flickered back and forth between Cassie and the man, his mind struggling to comprehend what he was seeing.

The man walked into the living room with a relaxed smile, completely unaware of the tension in the air. He greeted Cassie warmly, wrapping an arm around her waist.

"Hey, babe," the man said, brushing a kiss on her cheek.

Jason froze, a pit forming in his stomach. Cassie glanced at him, unfazed by the chaos brewing in his mind.

"Jason, this is Ben," she said coolly, her voice devoid of emotion. "My boyfriend."

Jason’s world tilted on its axis. "Boyfriend?" he repeated, his voice hoarse, barely able to get the words out. "What... what is this?"

Cassie turned toward him, her expression hardening. "He’s my boyfriend. You know, the man I’ve been seeing since we broke up," she said, emphasizing the last part with a sharp glance.

Jason couldn’t process what he was hearing. His mind replayed all the moments they had spent together, all the plans they had made, and he couldn’t wrap his head around how easily Cassie had moved on. She was supposed to be waiting for him. How could she do this? How could she replace him so quickly?

"You—" Jason’s voice cracked. "You moved on so fast? After everything we went through?"

Cassie’s eyes narrowed. "What did you expect, Jason? That I’d wait around for you forever? That I’d sit here, hoping you'd come back after all that nonsense with Mia?"

She shook her head in disbelief. "You think I’d be second choice to her? That I’d just take you back because you couldn’t have her? You were never second choice, Jason. I was done with you long before you even thought about coming back."

Jason felt a rush of guilt and humiliation hit him all at once. His chest tightened as the reality of Cassie’s words settled in. He had taken her for granted, thinking she’d always be there, waiting for him to make up his mind. He had never considered that she had her own life, her own needs, her own heart to protect.

Cassie continued, her voice steady but firm. "I’m not a backup plan, Jason. You only came to me after Mia shut you down. You didn’t care about me when you had her, but now that she’s not interested, you want to come back to me?"

Jason opened his mouth, but the words wouldn’t come. His mind was clouded with a mixture of anger, regret, and disbelief. He had always been so sure of himself, so certain that Cassie would be there waiting for him. But now, everything was falling apart.

"Please, Cassie," he whispered, the desperation clear in his voice. "I made a mistake. I was wrong. I’m sorry."

Cassie shook her head, her eyes softening only for a brief moment before hardening again. "It’s too late for apologies, Jason. You’ve had your chances. And you blew them."

She glanced over at Ben, who had been standing quietly by her side, watching the exchange with mild amusement. "Ben and I have a future together now. I don’t have time for someone who only wants me when it’s convenient for him. So, I’m asking you to leave, Jason. Please."

The finality in her voice hit him like a punch to the gut. His entire world felt like it was crumbling in that moment. He had lost her, truly lost her.

Jason’s face twisted with pain, but he knew there was no point in fighting anymore. The man he had been was no longer welcome in Cassie’s life. He turned to leave, his heart heavy with shame and defeat.

As he stepped out of the door, Cassie’s words echoed in his mind. You were never second choice. I was done with you long before you even thought about coming back.

It was a bitter truth he couldn’t escape.

**Chapter 27: The Weight of Regret**

Jason sat at the corner of the dimly lit bar, the amber liquid in his glass swirling as he stared at it, lost in thought. His mind kept replaying the last few days—the interactions with Mia, with Cassie, the mistakes he had made, and the opportunities he had squandered.

He had always thought he had time. Time to fix things, time to make amends, time to prove himself. But now, it felt like time was slipping through his fingers, and with it, both women who had once loved him.

He took another sip of his drink, the alcohol burning his throat, but it did nothing to numb the guilt gnawing at his insides. I messed up, he thought bitterly. For the first time in a long time, Jason couldn’t remember a time when he felt more lost.

His thoughts drifted back to Mia—the first woman who had truly captivated his heart. The memories of their time together flooded his mind, moments of laughter, tenderness, and hope. He had once thought she was the one, the person he could build a life with. But his selfishness, his inability to fully commit, and his doubts had driven a wedge between them. And now, she was gone. She had moved on, leaving him to wallow in his mistakes.

Mia had given him everything—her love, her trust, her heart—and he had thrown it away for someone who hadn’t even cared about him the way she had. He could still hear her voice when she had told him it was over, how she had finally found freedom. It was as if a weight had been lifted from her, and he was left with nothing but the crushing realization that he had lost her forever.

Then there was Cassie. The woman who had always been there for him, the one who had supported him even when he didn’t deserve it. He had taken her for granted, assuming that she would always wait for him. But she hadn’t. She had moved on, just like Mia had, and now, as he sat here alone, he understood why.

Cassie had been right to walk away. He had been selfish and immature, never truly appreciating her for who she was, always thinking of himself first. And now, she was with someone else, someone who could give her what he never could. He couldn’t blame her for that. If anything, he blamed himself.

The alcohol blurred his thoughts, but it didn’t erase the pain. He closed his eyes, feeling the weight of his regrets pressing down on him. How did I get here? He had once had everything—two women who loved him, a future filled with possibilities. Now, all he had was the quiet hum of the bar and the sting of the past.

He thought about what he had lost. Mia, with her gentle kindness and unwavering loyalty. Cassie, with her fiery spirit and heart full of love. He had let both of them slip through his fingers, and there was no one else to blame but himself.

Jason reached for his glass, taking another long drink, trying to drown out the voices in his head. It’s too late, he thought bitterly. I had my chance, and I blew it.

He counted his losses as the night wore on, each drink bringing him closer to numbness, but the emptiness inside never fully subsided. The faces of Mia and Cassie lingered in his mind, reminders of the love he had taken for granted. He had lost both of them, and he knew he had no one to blame but the man staring back at him in the reflection of the bar mirror.

The bartender looked at him with a mix of concern and indifference, but Jason didn’t care. He didn’t care about anything anymore. His world had crumbled, and he was left to pick up the pieces of a life that no longer felt worth living.

He emptied his glass, staring at the bottom, wondering if he would ever find his way back. But deep down, he knew the truth. Some things, once broken, could never be fixed. And now, he would have to live with the consequences of his choices, alone.

As the night stretched on, Jason sank further into his regrets, the weight of his mistakes pressing down on him, suffocating him with each passing moment. He had lost them both—Mia and Cassie—and there was nothing left for him now but the quiet, relentless ache of a broken heart.

And so, in the dim glow of the bar, Jason drowned his sorrows, knowing that no amount of alcohol could ever wash away the pain of losing everything he had ever wanted.