

BILLIONAIRE BOSS PROTECTOR

A GRUMPY BOSS ROMANCE

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CHAPTER I

NATALIE

Clutching my purse, I march back toward the black Mercedes Maybach waiting at the entrance of the cemetery. It's only about three in the afternoon, but the clouds have turned gray suddenly without warning, the moisture in the air growing heavier each second, causing the world to turn dark and dank all around me. Pressing my eyes closed, I flinch, rooted on the spot when a sharp streak of lightning cuts across the sky, followed by a rumble of thunder. Biting my bottom lip, I swallow my tears.

Damn it, Natalie. You're twenty-four years old and still scared of a little desert monsoon?!

As the sound fades, I take a deep breath to gather my strength and begin to sprint as large droplets of water start to fall. Panicking, I dash, not noticing the puddle of mud at my feet, only to slip and fall on my butt with a thud.

Jesus! What a klutz!

With gritted teeth, I attempt to scramble to my feet, only to be startled when low thunder booms again. Heavy rain begins pouring down in sheets and it only takes a moment for me to get drenched pitifully. Feeling my strength escaping my body, my knees grow weak before I can straighten up. My vision is blurred

by the driving rain as my eyes catch sight of a familiar figure getting out of the car.

Come on, Nat. Just a few more steps. Get up!

I give up my attempt as the skies grumble again while my hands subconsciously find their way to cover my ears. The cold air seeps into my skin and I shiver harshly. I can't be sure if it's because of my fear, the chilling wind through my damp clothes, or the icy cold glare coming from the approaching figure of a man carrying a black umbrella. Within a few breaths, he successfully rescues me from my pathetic pit of mud and despair and seamlessly deposits me on the passenger seat.

I purse my lips as he throws his coat over me, blasting the heater, and adjusting the vents so that they're all aimed directly at me.

"I-I..." I stutter when he shoots me a look. His jaw is clenched, and his steel grey eyes look deadly as he squints ever so faintly. "I-I didn't mean it. I'm sorry."

"Mmh," he hums simply.

Averting my gaze, I bow my head and stare at the droplets of water through the window as he maneuvers the vehicle from behind the steering wheel. I close my eyes and utter a silent prayer when lightning flashes again. Fortunately, the noise is muffled in the cabin of the car, and the ride back home is quick.

I get out of the vehicle the moment it pulls to a stop in the driveway. Without sparing the man another glance, I sprint up the stairs and head straight to my bedroom. My clothes are already mostly dry, but I feel sticky and humiliated. I take a warm shower, blow-dry my hair, and fall onto my bed, staring blankly at the ceiling.

Today is the third anniversary of my grandfather's death. For the same amount of time, I've been living under a roof with the cold and despotic Derik Lewis. Throughout these years, I still can't seem to get used to his demeanor.

Sometimes he's okay, but most times he's overbearing and difficult to read. I still cannot understand why my grandpa trusted the man so much, to leave me in his hands. These thoughts linger in my mind as I doze off.



It's pitch-dark when I wake up, making me shoot up from my bed.

It would be detrimental if I came late for dinner. Derik hates tardiness and values his timetable. The best I can do is adjust and avoid stepping on his toes.

After all, he is my guardian.

I hurriedly slip into a pair of denim shorts and an old t-shirt from the stack of old clothes in my wardrobe, quite pleased that they still fit. The trip back to Tucson was planned, but I didn't really pack anything since the villa has been under trusted care these past few years and I'd never moved all my things out when I left for college.

"You're awake," Mrs. Whittle greets me when she sees me enter the dining hall. She's the caretaker, and I've been familiar with her since I was fifteen.

"Good evening," I greet back with a smile.

Settling on my chair, my eyes fall on the man sitting at the center of the long table. He looks at me grimly, as if I've committed a crime.

I shudder uncomfortably.

"I-I...dozed off."

"Mmm," he acknowledges absently before continuing with his meal.

I perch on my seat, observing his form while waiting for my food. Derik looks like he's shooting an ad for a high-end brand of cutlery. His movements are graceful and refined. Mesmerizing would be an understatement. Without

question, with his impeccable looks, regal aura, and bottomless pockets, women would easily line up from his doorstep to Tokyo for a chance with him.

The sleeves of his black shirt are folded to his elbows, revealing his strong forearms. His muscles contract faintly with his every move. My gaze unconsciously travels to his wide chest and shoulders. Undoubtedly, he's the only man I've ever seen with such a flawless physique. His face is out of this world. Seriously, if Lewis Corporation ever declares bankruptcy, he could still maintain a lavish lifestyle by becoming a model or an actor. From his sharp jaw, chiseled nose, thin lips, and tantalizing grey eyes that seem to suck the energy out of everything he lays them into—he is every bit gorgeous. If someone were to claim he stepped straight out of a romance novel, I wouldn't argue! To top it all off, he's only in his early thirties, and already possesses everything any woman could desire in a partner. I can't help but wonder why he's still single.

I snigger inwardly, realizing that regardless of how perfect he seems, he's human, too. He's not actually flawless. And because of that, he possesses the greatest flaw—his attitude. Any woman would want a warm and happy life full of love.

Derik cannot offer them that.

He's a statue, after all. Soulless, ruthless, and devoid of emotion.

"Eat," Derik orders, pulling my thoughts back to the present. I feel heat creeping up my cheeks when I realize he just caught me staring at him.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

Mrs. Whittle arranges my cutlery and I focus on my meal in silence. From the corner of my eye, I observe Derik finish eating, but he remains seated, scrolling on his phone impassively. When I'm done with my meal, I feel his eyes linger on me.

"Your grandfather entrusted you to me for one reason. Starting on Monday, you'll be learning how to run Quinn Industries. You'll be taking over your

family's business soon," he states gruffly, breaking his silence.

I frown and raise my head to meet his gaze.

"I just graduated. I was hoping I could take a little break," I plead timidly.

He frowns in disapproval.

"Ms. Quinn, there are many people who cannot afford for you to take a break. Quinn Industries employs thousands of people, and whether you like it or not, their livelihoods are in your hands. This is a serious responsibility."

I look down, my hopes deflated. I've already planned to catch up with my old friends here in Tucson. I want to take a stroll through the places my parents used to take me and reminisce about how happy my life used to be. Is that too much to ask?

"I-I...I just want to stay here for a little while," I redirect my gaze to the droplets of water cascading down the windowsill and muster some courage to look him in the eyes again. "Can't I?"

Derik pauses and squints his eyes, sending shivers down my spine. I can feel my ass sweating in anxiety, but I dare to offer him a pleading look—the same puppy eyes I used to give my grandpa when I was asking for something.

His mouth rises into a mocking grin.

Okay, that was a futile attempt.

"You'll start on Monday."

My shoulders drop.

"William will arrange your position and the duties you'll be assigned. Lewis Corporation and Quinn Industries have a joint project in Tucson. You'll be working on that."

Hearing this, happiness surges through me. Blinking, I glance up at him in disbelief as a smile slowly creeps across my lips. If I didn't know him so well, I would pounce on him in an outpouring of gratitude.

"Are you serious? Thank you, Mr. Lewis!"

“Mmm,” he replies before getting up.

I watch him climb the grand staircase to his study, feeling conflicted.

I’d hoped to ask him about the possibility of moving out on my own, but he doesn’t seem to be in the best mood today. Maybe tomorrow.

CHAPTER 2

DERIK

“**T**ighten the reins on the media, make sure nothing gets leaked. Lewis Corporation cannot afford to take a big hit right now.”

I pace back and forth in my upstairs study, on a call with my assistant, William, giving him directives to handle the commotion over SanTech—a company acquired by Lewis Corporation that specializes in the production and research of AI Technology. A burglary has occurred at the site where an exhibition of the newly created tech is being held. If things go awry, it will take a toll; not only on the company’s image, but also a huge plunge in its stocks. We’re talking about hundreds of millions of dollars of loss.

That addressed, I stay on the call for a couple minutes longer, giving him further instructions for coordinating Natalie’s training. She must learn the ropes of running the business her family left now that she’s finished her studies.

Heaving a deep sigh, I slam my body against the office chair and press my temples with my fingers when I hear a light knock on the door. I glance at the grandfather clock, realizing that it’s almost nine in the evening.

I frown.

“Come in.”

My brows immediately knit together when my gaze lands on the feminine figure in the doorway. She's carrying a tray with a teacup and pot. Biting her bottom lip, her large, bright, blue-green eyes hesitantly meet my gaze. Her chestnut hair is fixed into a careless bun, giving her a casual, playful look. I observe her for a few more seconds in silence while my eyes travel from her beautiful, innocent face to her slender body that is covered with the thin fabric of her shirt. I still remember how small her waist was and how light she felt in my arms when I carried her earlier. She displays her graceful legs confidently in her tattered denim shorts. It has been three years since we first crossed paths, and I must admit she's developed into a fine woman in that time—the kind that any man would fantasize about.

I clench my jaw, suppressing the intrusive and inappropriate thoughts.

"I brought you tea," she announces shyly and sweetly.

"Do you need something?" I raise my brow.

Natalie is a woman left in my care by her deceased grandfather, whom I respect and owe a great deal to. She had been an orphan, adopted by the Quinns, and old Mr. Quinn had entrusted his business and her well-being to my hands. Agreeing to take care of her had been the least I could do to help him rest in peace.

She eyes me before shaking her head.

"Nothing, really. I just came to thank you for allowing me to stay here a little longer. I know that you already have a lot on your plate, and I have my own responsibilities. So, this is me expressing my gratitude."

"There's no need. It's my responsibility," I reply dismissively, pulling a file from the stack of documents in front of me.

She shrugs and walks over to set the tray on my desk. She quietly pours the steaming tea into the empty cup.

“Having coffee too often isn’t the best for one’s health, especially at night. Tea is a lot healthier.”

“Mmm.”

Giving her a quick sideways glance, I bury my nose in the file. Her presence is something I have learned to tolerate over the years. The woman knows her boundaries, and that is something I appreciate.

“Anything more?” I nudge.

I know she wouldn’t come into my office just to express thanks.

She blinks when our eyes meet, looking startled at my prodding.

“I’ll leave you to your business, then. Goodnight.”

Silently turning on her heels, I watch her sashay toward the door, her hips swaying with each step. I stiffen uncomfortably, realizing that my eyes have become more attuned to her after having held her in my arms and felt her body pressed against mine earlier.

“Dress appropriately when you go to work.”

It is an order.

She pauses for a moment and then looks back at me with a smirk.

“What do you take me for? I’m not a child.”

“Mmm.”

CHAPTER 3

NATALIE

Stomping resentfully, I march my way back to my bedroom. I was obviously pushing my luck thinking of asking him about moving out. He has always made it crystal clear that everything he does for me is his responsibility, never out of actual care or concern. If I were to bring up the topic, I'm sure he'd toss the idea out instantly, insisting it's his obligation to keep me safe and all that blah-blah-blah.

I sigh heavily after slipping into my pajamas, staring listlessly at the dew that's formed on my window. Fortunately, the rain has stopped, but regardless of the absence of thunder and lightning outside, there's a storm brewing inside my head.

I'm not a child anymore.

If my grandfather were around, he would have already allowed me to move out on my own.

Living with a cold man like Derik in a large, desolate place, having my every move dictated and scrutinized, has only made me feel emptier through the years.

If only he could show me a little warmth, then it wouldn't be so bad.

I would be a liar if I said that I've never once felt my heart flutter when near him. But he never fails to remind me that he's only concerned with what is expected of him, and there is nothing more to it. Derik Lewis is all business and nothing but.

Clearly, he doesn't want me to get the wrong idea.

The idea that he might actually have a heart.

Over time I've gotten used to him, numbing out and finally getting over my stupid, unrequited crush. It could never work out anyway. My background is not as affluent as his and, in a sense, we're like family.

I'll head downtown and do some shopping for new clothes tomorrow. I refuse to give him the chance to see me as incompetent and childish when I show up for work. Turning off my bedside lamp, I curl up and drift off to sleep.



“Good morning, Ms. Quinn.”

William, a professional man in his late thirties, greets me with a plain expression on his face when I enter the breakfast room in the morning. Seeing that Derik is not around, I frown. He's never been one to skip breakfast.

“Mr. Lewis has business to attend to at the headquarters. He had to fly back to San Francisco early this morning to deal with it.”

I flash a polite smile and nod in response.

Derik is a busy man, after all. Being the chairman of a large and listed company like Lewis Corporation is not child's play. I admire his discipline and work ethic, but I can't understand his character and disposition.

“Mr. Lewis also told me to help you choose appropriate clothes for work. He's collected a list of brands and new releases for this season. Would you like to

have a look?”

I flash a look of suspicion toward the tablet in his hand.

“He asked you to do what?”

“These are the styles he’s approved of,” William responds, swiping and scrolling on the gadget. “I’ll make calls and have them delivered today after you finish choosing.”

My jaw drops.

I’ve never been stingy. I have my own financial freedom. Thanks to the assets my grandfather left me, money has never been an issue. But I can’t get around the fact that Derik has the time to nitpick what kind of clothes I should be wearing.

Is he trying to impose martial law on me?

I scoff silently.

This is fashion terrorism and a violation of my expressive rights!

Mrs. Whittle sets the food on the table quietly and urges me to eat. I oblige after inviting William to sit down and have a meal with me, which he declines politely, saying that he needs to make calls while waiting for me.

After about twenty minutes, I’m unhappily seated in the living room with the fashion enforcement tablet. I can’t help but snicker at the clothes that are ‘Derik Approved.’ All of them are from high-end brands but are styles a woman in her fifties would wear.

Tossing the gadget aside, I dial Derik’s number, it immediately goes through—as usual. He always picks up my calls, probably making sure I’m not in an emergency or something.

“I know you feel like you’re responsible for me, Derik. I understand that you’re a loyal person, but you don’t need to nitpick everything. I’m not incompetent.”

The line is quiet for about three breaths.

“Nitpick? This is not debatable, Ms. Quinn.”

I pause, realizing this is the first time I’ve ever called him by his first name.

“I am not wearing clothes made for a middle-aged woman! How will I ever find a good man if you insist on dressing me up like a nun?!”

He sighs. In my mind, I picture the permanent frown on his face turning into a grim scowl.

“Ms. Quinn, you need to appear respectable to exercise command in the corporate world.”

I release an exasperated sigh.

“I never expect you to consider what I want, but I don’t plan on ruining my chances of having a love life just because you want to impose your control over me. Don’t do it again.”

There is a long pause that makes me break a slow, cold sweat.

“Mmm.”

He doesn’t argue any further and ends the call without another word, making me more furious.

Grumbling angrily, I storm back to my bedroom and slip into a knee-length, fitted beige dress and a pair of high-heeled strappy sandals. I put on light, neutral make-up and grab large sunglasses and a round rattan purse I bought on a trip to Indonesia when I was in my teens. The clothes I have at this house are a bit outdated, but nothing I can’t work with.

Every girl enjoys dressing up to feel good about herself, and I am no exception. It’s absurd to allow Derik, a man who only knows how to don custom-made black suits, to dictate my fashion preference.

William takes me out shopping the entire day. It’s dinnertime when we arrive back at the villa.

CHAPTER 4

DERIK

“I’ll be in Tucson for the next few weeks. How’s the museum project going?”

I lean against the back seat as William briefs me on the current state of the Tucson projects. Flying back and forth is common. It’s a relief to me that the situation at headquarters was addressed quickly.

“It’s moving according to schedule. However, the business center project under Quinn Industries is having some difficulty.”

“What is it?” I ask, shooting William an inquisitive look through the rearview mirror. He is driving us back to the Lewis Corporation building, as I’ve instructed him.

“The designs were rejected.”

Quinn Industries is a company built by Natalie’s grandparents. They’re a family of architects and engineers, the same path that Natalie has chosen to follow. The company has grown successful and has established its influence in the construction industry. Presently, it mostly runs according to the needs of Lewis Corporation, as I can’t just hand over the management rights to someone else.

I sigh.

“How’s Ms. Quinn doing?”

William steers the car into the parking lot, coming to a halt at the entrance of the company building. He takes a tablet from the passenger seat and hands it to me.

“I planned accordingly, as requested. Ms. Quinn has already blended well with her team, after just a week. I expected it wouldn’t take her long to get accustomed to it.”

“Mmm.”

I scroll over the gadget and look at the plan William has written up for Natalie’s training. It’s been created specifically to cater to her need to excel as a leader in her industry and prepare her to lead the business accordingly.

“This is good. But she can’t take this long a route. Assign her to be the project manager for the business center. Get me a change of clothes.”

William nods cooperatively as I hand the tablet back to him. He gets out of the driver’s seat and opens the door for me. It’s almost ten in the morning, and many employees having their coffee break are gathered in groups by the lobby.

“Good morning, Mr. Lewis,” greets one group of women, smiles spread across their lips. The anxiety in their gazes does not escape my attention.

I lightly nod in acknowledgment as William strides a step behind me, continuing with his briefing and reminding me of the schedule.

“Would you like to drop by Ms. Quinn’s office?” he inquires attentively as we step into my private elevator. The man has been working for me for almost five years now and has become my most trusted personnel.

“Mmm.”

Quinn Industries was established in Tucson. Many professionals in the construction industry have been seeking to gain footing in it, knowing that the owners are no longer around. Natalie is the sole heir, but still a novice. It would

be difficult for her to keep her position if I handed over the company quickly. She needs to be well-equipped to run it smoothly.

“She has been learning under the direct supervision of Engineer Moore,” William says, pulling my attention back to the present as my eyes land on Natalie. She’s speaking with a man as we approach their department.

“Moore?”

My brows meet.

“Yes, Mason Moore. Arthur Moore’s eldest son.”

Without speaking, I nod lightly and redirect my gaze to the woman. Her long chestnut hair is fixed into a high ponytail, revealing her lovely neck. She’s wearing a black satin button-up blouse paired with gray, flat front straight-leg slacks. Her black high-heeled shoes add a few inches to her height. She looks elegant and sophisticated in the way she moves her hands, gesturing to some papers in her hand. Her features are perfectly accented by her light makeup, too. But then again, she doesn’t need much since she’s so naturally beautiful.

“The Moores have a good background and have been in the construction industry for decades. They were quite acquainted with old Mr. Quinn. Mason Moore has proven his capability and become one of the current backbones of Quinn Industries.”

William’s words carry on as my eyes land on the man before her. The way he looks at Natalie is different from how you would normally look at a colleague.

My fists clench.

“Mmm.”

I turn away quietly. Seeing her doing well at work is enough. Watching her grow into a capable professional leader is my responsibility, so that when she’s ready to live an independent life, I won’t have to worry about her anymore.

And the sooner the better.

CHAPTER 5

NATALIE

Staring at the old grandfather clock, I place my book down on the coffee table. It's almost midnight, but Derik hasn't gotten back to the villa yet. I've been waiting for him after learning he's back from San Francisco. He isn't the kind to spend the night at the office, regardless of how hectic his schedule is.

I tap my finger restlessly on my phone.

Should I check on him?

After deliberating, I hit the speed dial for his number. Panic builds within me with each ring. He's not picking up! I set the phone down and lace my fingers together on my lap, my mind racing with treacherous possibilities, then immediately feel relieved when I hear a car pull up the driveway.

He's back!

In silence, I sit on the sofa waiting for him to come inside. I swore to myself I wouldn't let this night pass without asking him about the possibility of me moving out. After giving it a lot of thought, I'm pretty certain he will agree with it now that I've started working.

"You're back!" I greet him as he enters the front door. He stops in his tracks when he hears my voice, his icy stare landing on me.

I shiver and then frown when I realize his tie is not in place. His hair is disheveled and faint dark circles frame the underside of his eyes. I've never seen him like this before.

He looks distraught.

"What are you doing here?" he questions. His tone is so low that I swear the room temperature drops a few degrees.

I inhale sharply, mustering the courage to look him straight in the eyes.

"I was waiting for you to come home."

He shoots me a mocking grin. For a moment, he exudes a menacing playfulness. He looks exceptionally gorgeous when his dimples appear at the corners of his mouth. But the dangerous gleam in his eyes isn't that difficult to read.

He is clearly in a bad mood. And there's a faint scent of liquor about him.

"Have you been drinking?" I ask instead.

Obviously, this isn't a good time to discuss my plans, so I head to the kitchen to make him honey water. Regardless of his coldness towards me, he's still the man who is considered my guardian, a big brother of sorts. My conscience won't allow me to just ignore him when he shows up looking like a helpless puppy.

Without answering, he follows me into the dining room in silence and takes a seat at the table. When I place the glass in front of him, he shoots me an inquisitive look.

"I read it helps with hangover."

He grasps the glass and chugs the water as if he's scared I'll take it back or something.

As I walk the empty glass back to the kitchen when he's done, I can hear him following unusually close behind me.

I don't think too much of it.

After all, drunk people tend to act strangely and cross social boundaries. I never imagined I'd ever lay eyes on a wasted Derik Lewis, though. He must be having a tough time at work and is just blowing off some steam.

"What do you want?" his voice questions over my shoulder in a low, melodious tone.

I turn and tilt my head upward to see his face, swallowing hard. He looks sinfully gorgeous as an amused grin plays across his lips. His eyes are weirdly bright, and the permanent frown on his face is replaced with a relaxed expression.

Every cell in my body reacts, completely disobeying my will.

A tipsy Derik Lewis is not something I ever thought I'd see and is unquestionably an endangerment to us both.

"N-Nothing!" I snap in surprise. "I tried to call but it didn't go through. So..."

His brows knit ever so faintly for a moment, then his expression relaxes again.

"Alright."

He shrugs and turns abruptly with his hands in the pockets of his pants. As he saunters away, he whistles a cheerful tune. Seeing this new side of him makes me feel uneasy inside. Why is he suddenly in a good mood? I didn't know he had good moods. Did he hit his head or something?

In a state of confusion, I brush past him, deciding to just go back to my bedroom for the night. It's draining to deal with someone who's not in their right mind. But before I can take a step on the grand staircase, a strong grip twists me around and pulls me in, my face bumping into something firm and warm.

"Ouch!" I whimper, inhaling a familiar musky scent mixed with liquor.

"Were you worried about me?"

My eyes widen. I'm in Derik's arms. There's a hint of hopefulness in his voice. I can't keep a clear head when I feel his hands running up and down my back. I'm instantly melting under his touch.

No! No! No!

My mind is telling me to pull away from his grasp, but I'm helplessly lured into his strong, wide chest. A rush of warmth floods my core when I feel him planting tender kisses on my hair.

"I-I...it's the first time you didn't pick up. I guess I panicked a little," I confess softly as he cradles my chin with his hand, our gazes meeting.

A glint of surprise crosses his eyes, and he bends down and scoops me up in his arms. Alarmed, my hands instinctively find their place around his neck for fear of falling to the floor. With our eyes locked, my heart throbs hard and loud against my chest when I see burning desire in the same eyes that usually look at me so coldly. He begins to carry me up the stairs.

"W-What are you doing?"

He flashes a smile, one that breaks all kinds of defenses I've built around myself these past three years. I can feel my stomach twisting with an intoxicating mixture of emotions that's making me lose my senses.

"I was thinking of this."

In a swoop, Derik crosses the distance between our faces, planting a kiss on my lips, shocking every single atom in my body with tiny bolts of electricity. It's soft and tender as if he has always longed for it. I can feel my heart bursting with a combination of surprise and pleasure as I respond clumsily. He breaks away from the kiss and marches intently up the remainder of the grand staircase. Reflexively, my hands tighten around his neck, reminding him that he's still carrying me.

"Don't drop me!" I whisper nervously.

He responds by sprinkling small kisses on my neck, making me whimper slightly as I tighten my body against his chest, yearning to feel his heat. I can't think straight, quickly becoming drunk off his tenderness.

I snap back to reality when he tosses me onto an unfamiliar king-sized bed. My eyes wander across the room, realizing it isn't mine. Biting my lower lip, I shoot him an inquiring look, trying to conjure some words, but I swallow them when I meet his smoldering gaze.

"We can stop if you don't want this, Natalie." His voice is low as he breathes heavily like it's taking all his strength to restrain himself.

Feeling suddenly devious and courageous, I rise from my back and perch on my knees at the edge of the bed.

He gulps.

"Come closer," I order.

I let go of all my senses and find myself unbuttoning his shirt, touching him shamelessly as I go until I've removed all his clothes. My hands explore the length of his wide shoulders and strong arms. His skin burns against mine, rousing all the hidden desires I hadn't known existed within me. Running my hands over his muscular chest, I firmly tease his nipples, making him groan in surrender as he grabs my wrists. My mouth curls into a seductive sneer and I pull him closer for a kiss, one hand around the back of his neck while the other finds his hard abs. The kiss is deep and passionate and ravenous as his tongue expertly slips into my mouth, playfully sucking, luring me into a pit of lust. His large, warm hands slip beneath the straps of my dress, sliding it down over my shoulders and off my hips.

I pull away to catch my breath, finding myself clothed in nothing but my flimsy lace underwear. His eyes scorch at the sight of my round, firm breasts; my cheeks burn when he lightly pushes me back onto the well-cushioned bed, leaning over me, confining me with his hands on each side of my shoulders.

"Stop staring..." I murmur shyly.

"Why? Am I not allowed to enjoy the view?"

He raises one eyebrow before indulging himself. He buries kisses deep between my breasts. I moan, arching my back, feeling his hot mouth sucking and licking one of my nipples while he busies his hands massaging my breasts. The pleasure flooding my senses is indescribable and overwhelming. I'm already about to lose my mind when his hand gently trails up and down between my legs over the thin fabric of my underwear.

"Ahhh..." I whimper breathlessly, unconsciously pulling his head closer as his tongue makes circling motions around my hard nipples. He wraps his large fingers around the crotch of my underwear, swiftly tearing them off my body, and making me gasp in surprise and delight. An ample finger slowly slips between my sensitive folds.

His lips travel down my belly, kissing and sucking trails along my perspiring skin. Sliding a second finger inside me, he moves slowly in and out, creating lewd noises that make me blush and look away.

"Look at me, Natalie," he orders. His voice is soft, yet full of lust.

I tilt my head to meet his gaze as one of his large palms parts my legs. I'm getting lightheaded, but a moan of protest escapes my mouth when he removes his fingers from my wet entrance.

His face approaches mine, devouring my lips in another deep kiss. I gasp, feeling the weight of his copious manhood rubbing against my clit. Excitement and anticipation fill my senses, and my legs part wider to accommodate his large figure. I place an arm against his chest to break the kiss, flashing him an amused grin.

"You're quite gifted down there, Mr. Lewis," I tease as I wrap my free hand around his arousal, guiding it inside my sensitive area with eagerness.

He grunts and I moan as he enters my body.

"Ohh...God."

Damn it. He's too big!

I gasp in a mixture of surprise and pain as tears form at the corners of my eyes.

“Does it hurt?”

Derik halts for a moment and looks at me worriedly. He pushes a few strands of hair to the back of my ear. The tenderness in his gaze only stirs my desire. He looks at me as if I’m the most delicate thing he’s ever laid his eyes on, and it makes my heart flutter incessantly.

Instead of answering, I slide my hands around to grasp the backs of his shoulders and kiss him.

Taking it as consent, Derik moves his length carefully in and out of me. I can’t suppress the primitive sounds of pleasure escaping my throat. He sucks my tongue, and I dig my nails into his back as our pace quickens and the sound of slapping skin echoes across the walls.

“Ohh...hmmm...” I wail as his movements become deeper and faster. I’m losing my mind. All I know is what I want in this moment, and what I want is every part of him enmeshed with every part of me.

“Derik...” I call out. “Hmm...”

He pauses.

“Say that again?” he orders, a perverted smirk on his face.

“S-say what?”

Blinking in confusion, I instinctively squirm my hips, tortured by his stillness, without averting his gaze. His jaw is clenched, and it takes me a moment to realize what he means.

Oh, gosh. Men have such weird fetishes!

“Derik...” I murmur, moaning his name as seductively as I can. “Derik, fuck me...”

Without warning, he plunges his entire length into me, reaching the deepest parts of my center. I shriek as an explosion of pleasure overtakes my entire

being. His hand cups and massages my breast while his mouth fondles the crook of my neck.

“Arghh...oh...I’m coming!” I wail, feeling him swelling inside of me.

I sound like a complete stranger to myself, but I don’t care.

I like the way it feels.

And I like the fact that he’s my first.

His breathing is frantic and erratic, and his movements are hard and fast. With a final, intense thrust and loud moan into my ear, I feel him pulsate, shooting his load into my depths. Planting a long and tender kiss on my lips, he rolls to my side and encloses me inside his strong arms. I fall asleep while staring at his handsome features, feeling an unusual sense of satisfaction and completeness.

Yet there’s an unsettling knowledge within me—we’ve turned a page that we can never turn back.

CHAPTER 6

DERIK

Leaning with one hand on the wall of the shower, the hot water running down my body, I curse silently, relieving myself as the memory from last night torments my mind. Finding Natalie curled naked in my arms early this morning made me feel a mix of lust, guilt, satisfaction...and oddly...a sense of peace and happiness.

I pant with heavy breaths as I firmly stroke my arousal with quick motions.

When did I become such a bastard to even think of ever defiling her?

I groan as a generous load of semen erupts from my cock. Unfortunately, it isn't enough to satiate me as the alluring sound of her voice and visions of the night before flash through my memory. I know we've crossed a line, and there's no turning back.

I desperately search my mind for some way to correct my mistake.

I have witnessed Natalie blossom into a beautiful, intelligent, confident woman. But she's someone I've been tasked with taking care of—she should not fall prey of my lust. How could I have done this?

As thoughts of her continue to fill my mind, I'm overwhelmed by a yearning for her that cannot be physically satisfied, so I give up and decide on a warm

soak in the tub, hoping the licentious urge will eventually subside.

Could it be that I'm just insanely starved for sex these days?

I was completely clear-headed last night, and everything is vivid in my memory. I may have consumed a fair amount of alcohol, but not enough to cloud my judgment. I'm not even a lustful man to begin with, and my self-control isn't something that's ever been easily swayed.

There's an abrupt knock on the bathroom door.

Startled, I jump.

"Derik?"

It's Natalie. Her voice is soft and hoarse—perhaps from all the screaming last night?

I shake my head to erase the dirty thought. Damn it.

It's still early. How is she already awake?

Standing up out of the water, I grab a towel and wrap it around my waist. As if understanding my concerns, the little soldier finally bows down, allowing me to regain my composure.

"Good morning," she greets coquettishly as I step out of the bathroom. She's seated at the edge of my bed with my blanket wrapped around her petite figure. She looks radiant and naturally beautiful. My eyes land on the hickeys on her neck, and I can't help but feel a little proud.

Dumbass.

I grit my teeth and assume my usual expression.

"Mmm."

Turning coolly, I open the closet without sparing her another glance and start slipping into my suit. I'm not the least bit bothered by her presence, even with her eyes following me around the room.

"I-I..."

"Do you need anything?" I ask flatly, slightly tilting my head to look at her.

The smile on her lips immediately disappears and her expression turns blank. Her blue-green eyes meet mine and our gazes lock for a few seconds before she shakes her head in response and slips out of the room without speaking.

Watching the door close behind her, I release a deep breath, chastising myself inwardly for handling the situation so insensitively. But sensitivity has never been my thing, and I don't think I could achieve it even if I wanted to.

Over the years, I've learned that silence is the strongest message a man can send a woman. Natalie is a wise woman. She will understand it.

Screwing her is already a grave sin, and a fuck up I literally cannot un-fuck. Giving her false hope is something I refuse to do to her.

CHAPTER 7

NATALIE

I sigh heavily, staring absently at the sunset through the glass walls. It hasn't been that long since I started working at the company my grandfather left me, but I already want to quit and hide. It's hard work, which isn't something I've ever shied away from, nor is it something I normally can't handle. It's just that the miserable emptiness I feel every time I go home is consuming my energy.

It's weird.

I thought I'd grown numb to this over the past three years.

I thought the defenses I'd built were impenetrable.

But when I was with Derik, I was over the moon with hopes and expectations, only for them to be crushed the moment I opened my eyes that morning.

I didn't know whether to laugh or cry when I learned that Derik had dumped one project after another on my team. He's deliberately made me the leader, forcing me to work long hours in addition to my other classes and training. I suspect he's trying to preoccupy me with work.

I sip from my mug, forcing myself to enjoy the coral-orange sky over the desert cityscape.

The passion of the night we spent together is long gone now. It seems as though it was all a dream at this point. It's been about six weeks since I last saw him. He's gone when I wake up in the morning, and I hear him come home after I'm in bed at night. There have been days he's flown to other states or gone back to headquarters without informing me. He's just gone without a word, and I don't know if he'll ever be back.

I know well enough that a man's silence is a clear message and dwelling on it is only a waste of my time.

What happened between us happened with my consent, and I don't regret it, so there's no use crying over spilled milk.

My thoughts are pulled back to the present as I feel my phone vibrating in my back pocket. I purse my lips when I see the caller ID.

Speak of the devil.

"We'll be attending Mr. Wilson's sixtieth birthday banquet tonight. Be ready to go by seven."

I open my mouth to respond just as I hear the beep of the line going dead, leaving me alone in the silence again, abandoned. I understand that he doesn't want anything to do with me, even after bedding me—it is crystal clear—but he doesn't have to treat me like a plague!

Angrily dragging my feet to the employee kitchen, I pour the remaining tea from my cup into the sink and leave. Derik has never been the boss of me. I've always done my part as I owe him for watching over me and taking care of the business my family left. I quickly march to my office and furiously grab my bag. I don't bother masking my rage as I stride across the halls.

"You seem to be in a particularly bad mood, Ms. Quinn," I hear Mason's voice comment, seemingly out of nowhere, as I step onto the elevator. Apparently, he's been following quietly behind me in my storm out of the office. He presses the main floor button knowingly.

I grumble and let out an exasperated sigh, still fuming over Derik's attitude. Mason chuckles.

"Love life problem?" he pries.

I smirk.

"Do I seem like the type of woman who has time for that, Mr. Moore?" I ask formally. The man is easygoing, but I've always believed that formalities are necessary in a workplace, so I continue to address him that way.

"Oh, come on, Natalie. We're technically off work."

I shoot him a look and roll my eyes as the elevator comes to a stop. He nonchalantly walks me out of the lobby and to my car, as if this is our usual routine.

"What do you want?" I ask impatiently.

"Well... I'll be attending Mr. Wilson's birthday party tonight. I don't have a date yet. Since it seems you're in a sour mood, I bet going with me would brighten you up."

Amused, I cross my arms over my chest, watching him intently. He looks handsome as he grins mischievously, one eyebrow raised, and I find it cute when I notice the tips of his ears growing red.

"I've never in my life been so indirectly invited on a date, Mason."

His eyes brighten upon hearing his name coming out of my mouth.

Why is he being so bashful?

"So?" He looks hopeful.

I sigh and shake my head.

"I'm sorry, I have to pass. Someone already invited me. Maybe next time?"

His shoulders drop but the smile on his face does not disappear entirely. In a split second, he regains his composure and nods lightly without another word. He opens the door to the driver's seat of my white Cayenne and hovers a hand over me to make sure I don't bump my head.

“Is this one of the many tricks a playboy employs to impress a woman?” I tease, grinning at him. When his face turns red, I burst into laughter.

Mason scratches the back of his head, lost for words.

“What made you assume I am one?”

“I’m just teasing. See you later!”

With that, I drive out of the parking lot and head straight to the villa. After having been humiliated, my conviction to move out and live independently has only gotten stronger. Over the past few days, I’ve realized that I’ll lose my sanity if I continue living with an elusive, emotionless rock.

Enough is enough.

Derik’s Maybach is parked in the driveway when I arrive. There’s a black Cadillac limo waiting behind it, confirming that Derik is indeed home. Confidently, I march in the front door to find him in a crisp black suit, looking a bit like a panther. He is dangerously handsome with his hair styled into a quiff. His steel gray eyes look tired but as alert as ever. He looks like he’s lost a little bit of weight, as his cheeks look a little gaunt, but without diminishing his attractiveness. Instead, it only makes his sharp features more evident.

My gaze meets his and my knees grow weak, making me painfully aware of how much I’ve longed to see him.

My heart aches as I feel the familiar cold seep through my skin. His expression is void of emotion and there is no trace of the tenderness he had shown me that night. We are back to square one, and it’s far more painful this time.

“Oh, you’re home! Here I was thinking you’re deliberately avoiding me! To think you’d show up yourself when William could have just picked me up.”

Impressed that my voice didn’t crack under the weight of my emotion, my grip on the handle of my handbag tightens. I used to stutter and feel anxious around him, but I guess I’ve gotten over that. If he’s been deliberately avoiding

me these past few weeks, then what is his motivation for escorting me to this party?

After all, a businessman's move is always about what benefits him.

"You have an hour."

I scoff and stride to the center of the living room. I toss my bag on the sofa and prop myself on the empty seat across from him without sparing him a glance.

"I regret to inform you that I'm just too tired to party tonight, Mr. Lewis."

Derik shoots me a dangerous look, making shivers run down my spine as his brows knit and his jaw clenches. He gives off a menacing aura, but I won't budge. If he'd shown up like this weeks ago, I would have gladly obliged, since I was still holding out hope he'd come around.

It's too late now.

I'm done waiting for nothing.

"Good night, then. Enjoy your party."

I wave as he maintains his silence, studying me as if he's trying to measure me up. I grab my purse and march my way to the stairs, knowing he will easily break down the walls I've worked so hard to build up if I remain in his presence.

"What do you want?" his voice thunders across the walls.

Startled, I flinch. Out of the corner of my eye I see William, who is standing by the door, flinch as well. At least I'm not the only one who never can get used to his outbursts.

"I'm moving out."

I am not asking for permission. I'm declaring my independence.

Turning around, I look into his steel-gray eyes intently. A flash of surprise crosses them momentarily, but he instantly masks it with indifference. We stare, stuck in a deadlock for a moment, as I stand my ground.

It's now or never.

“Mmm.”

That’s it.

I won.

“I’ll be down in a minute,” I tell him, my nose upturned obstinately.

I thought I would feel victorious and free. But instead, I feel a tug at my heart that only makes it hard to breathe. Sure, I didn’t expect him to stop me now, after avoiding me so adamantly, but hearing him agree without a single attempt to dispute it hurts.

He really does want nothing to do with me.

CHAPTER 8

DERIK

“**M**r. Lewis! It’s an honor to finally have the pleasure of meeting a man as busy as you are!”

The voice is coming from the birthday celebrant, Mr. Robert Wilson. The man is dressed in a white suit. He looks nowhere near his age, and his presence exudes command and respect. He is one of the small handful of notorious professionals in the real estate sector of Arizona. His influence in the booming construction industry is second to none.

“You humble me, Mr. Wilson. The pleasure is all mine.”

My words are sincere. A seasoned businessman like himself is worth looking up to.

“Natalie has grown. Old Mr. Quinn would be so proud to see her bask in the spotlight,” he observes, standing in front of me, a drink in one hand, his other hand in his pants pocket.

I follow his gaze silently to the breathtaking woman smiling and mingling with other guests. She looks regal in her body-hugging, deep red gown that is matched with a set of pearl accessories. With her exquisite beauty, she stands out

like royalty in the crowd. I can't help but feel agitated as I observe countless men checking her out.

"She could have been an actress with that beautiful face. If I only had a grandson of my own, I'd make him court her. She'd be a lovely granddaughter-in-law!"

Mr. Wilson's words further agitate my thought process, making my hands clench into fists. I know that there are times old men tend to forget to filter their words, but considering his ties with old Mr. Quinn, it would have been possible.

"She's a quality woman, no doubt," I state as a matter of fact as my eyes continue to linger on her alluring, petite figure. She raises her head, and our gazes meet, her smile vanishing like she's caught sight of something formidable.

I can't blame her.

I've treated her horribly lately.

Mr. Wilson chuckles cheerfully at my side.

"Well, I guess there's no need for me to worry about Natalie, since she already has you."

My brows meet as I turn to check his expression, but he only raises his glass and eyes me meaningfully, patting my arm before attending to his other guests.

Sipping from my glass, I lose sight of Natalie as I'm hounded by a group of businessmen who are interested in working with Lewis Corporation. The night flies by in a blur, and as people begin filtering out, I notice it's time to leave.

My attention lands on her again. She's chatting enthusiastically with someone when our eyes lock. I tap at my watch to tell her it's time to go. A glint of annoyance flashes on her face, but she bids the person goodbye with a sweet smile before she kisses his cheek.

I feel bitter. I can even taste it on my tongue.

I despise myself for it.

Sauntering across the space like a goddess of seduction, she lifts the skirt of her gown with one hand to avoid stepping on it, revealing her long, flawless legs. Her hips sway flamboyantly with her every step.

Noticing the dangerously perverted stares she's gathered for herself, my protective instinct moves me to her side as I guide her into the limo, where she settles onto the seat farthest from me and quietly gazes out of the window as if she's lost in thought. Or perhaps just avoiding me.

Fair enough.

I fake a cough to break the silence.

"I'll be out of your way in no time," I say.

"No worries. You can keep living at the villa. My grandfather left it to you in exchange for mentoring me. I'll be the one moving out."

Her voice is calm and serene, her words flowing out of her as though she's humming a lullaby. I frown but do not prod. Even after all these weeks, we haven't spoken a word to each other about what happened between us. I expect that's why she's rushing to get away from me.

I respect her decision like I always have.

"I'll find myself a place in the city," she hums.

I sigh wearily, pressing my fingers to my temples.

"I'll need to ensure that it's up to your living standards," I state coolly.

"Since when do you know about my standards, Mr. Lewis?" she hisses.

"It's my responsibility."

She scoffs and shoots me a piercing glare.

"Oh, right. I almost forgot. You're the most responsible man in the world. You know just how to handle business. I'll leave it to you, then."

Her sarcasm is spot on. She sends a message that's impossible to miss. I give her a light nod without attempting to coax her. Her attitude toward me has turned

for the worse, and there is no one to blame but myself. I don't want to provoke her and get into a fight in the car. Or at all.

Ever.

Hopefully someday she'll get over it.

CHAPTER 9

NATALIE

Inhaling deeply, I allow the arid summer evening breeze to brush my face. Mr. Wilson's party was boring like any other high-profile gathering. My cheeks are sore from maintaining a fake smile for hours. If it weren't for Mason's appearance, I would have been bored to death as I waited for it to end while Derik went on with his usual business.

Standing on the balcony, I impassively watch the fountain in the courtyard. The water dances with the lights in synchronicity—lively and peaceful at the same time.

How nice would it have been if I'd had a sibling? Maybe I wouldn't have to live under a fascist like Derik Lewis. In fact, I might not even have to live my life on a track I'm not particularly interested in.

I bite my tongue.

I don't know how long I'm standing there before I feel it start to drizzle. To be able to enjoy the rain without a flood of anxiety is rare for me. I find it strange that I feel sanctified as I stand there, allowing the downpour to soothe my body, envisioning each droplet washing away my worries.

It's a little past midnight when I stir from my trance. I take a quick shower and slip into my nightgown, then decide to make a cup of tea to help me sleep. I silently make my way across the dim-lit hallway only to realize that the first floor is completely dark. I am not a scaredy-cat, but I feel a surge of anxiety spring through me when I step off the grand staircase onto the cold tile floor.

I press my hand to my chest, trying to calm my nerves. There couldn't possibly be a burglar, Derik has the place locked down with security.

This villa is where I grew up, and I've always felt safe and at home...why am I so sketched out? Has it become haunted over the years?

I want to laugh at myself as I realize that my mind is getting the best of me. Before I can take another step, a tingle dances down my spine and the hair on the nape of my neck stands needle straight. The silence is deafening, but I can feel someone's gaze holding me captive.

I blink a few times to adjust my vision. The faint light coming through the large glass windows emanates through the living room, and I can barely make out the silhouette of a large figure seated on the couch.

"What the fuck?!" I shriek in surprise as the masculine form unveils before me. I clutch my chest to calm down and control my voice.

It's Derik, looking as handsome and aloof as ever. He's still in the black suit he wore to the party. His features are vague but with his slight movement, I'm able to make out the icy grin on his mouth where the light scarcely touches his face. He holds a glass in one hand, with his free arm resting on the backrest. His legs are crossed. His noble aura overflowing.

"What? Were you expecting someone else?"

His voice is low and gruff. He doesn't hide the contempt in it.

"No! I just came down to make some tea," I reply bitterly. Throwing out an exasperated breath, I march across the room past him, but halfway through I feel a strong grip on my wrist.

“What are you doing?”

I halt and turn to face his tall stature.

“Let me go. It hurts!” I cry in protest. His grasp is rather tight.

“Why are you still awake? Aren’t you tired from dancing and flirting with that bastard?”

I jump when he growls without the tiniest control in his voice. I don’t understand where this is coming from, but it’s clear he’s mad. This is the second time he’s raised his voice to me today.

“Why? Are you jealous now? Last I checked, you couldn’t care less about what I do or whom I’m with. After all, I am just a liability that you have the *responsibility* to look after,” I scorn.

The fact that he’s humiliated me by using me and then throwing me away like trash over the past several weeks is more than enough to ignite the rage that I’ve tried to suppress.

How dare he question me like a jealous husband?!

He scoffs. I’m swept up in a foreboding feeling of danger as his arm slowly wraps around my waist. I try to push him away in protest, but to no avail; my strength is nothing to him. The next thing I know, I’m pulled onto his lap, my back facing him, and I can’t help but feel the heat creeping up my face as I realized how provocative our position is.

My satin nightgown is barely covering my chest. It’s the middle of the night, and I hadn’t anticipated that anyone would still be downstairs.

I don’t move, afraid that it might result in something I’ll regret.

My heart pounds hard against my chest as Derik’s arms encircle my waist more tightly. Then, he leans against me with his forehead on my back. His breath is erratic, and I shiver when I feel him bury his face in the crook of my neck.

“What are you doing?” I ask stiffly, feeling my senses grow weak under his touch.

“Ten minutes. Just give me ten minutes,” his voice is gentle, almost pleading.

I keep quiet, unsure how to react. Derik always gives off a daunting aura, like that of an emperor whose every word is law. But this man with his arms around me is an entirely different person.

Is it because of the alcohol?

Again?

I sigh and sit quietly as I place a hand on his. He takes it as consent and continues to inhale me as if his life depends on it. We stay like this until his breathing steadies and my nerves relax. I never imagined I'd be able to feel such a sense of security in his arms, even with deafening silence.

“Is work that tiring?” I whisper after a while, unable to suppress my curiosity.

He breathes rashly. I stiffen, feeling ticklish all over.

“Nothing I can't handle,” he replies, peacefully, softly.

“You should rest.”

“Mmmm,” he hums. “I am resting.”

“Derik...” I hiss as his hands start lightly traveling up and down my arms. My heartbeat quickens again. When he stops, I breathe in relief to which he replies with a groan of objection.

I snicker. Did he just try to act cute with me?

“I...I missed you,” I venture timidly.

There's only silence in response. But then his arms tighten around me.

A smile spreads across my lips as assurance and contentment fill me.

Feeling relaxed and safe in his arms, I inhale his scent deeply. It doesn't take long before my eyelids grow heavy.



I open my eyes to sunlight. It's morning and I'm in my own bed. Alarmed, I bolt upright and take inventory of myself.

Everything is normal.

I bite my lip when I feel my cheeks burning at the memory of Derik holding me like I'm his most prized possession.

It had to have been a dream.

Or another regrettable moment of weakness that will only drive him farther away from me.

CHAPTER 10

DERIK

Looking down at a set of blueprints, I study the meticulously constructed design of the business center project. The six-building plan has been approved by the investors and local officials of Tucson. As it covers a large portion of the northern district of the city, it has attracted the attention of numerous businesspeople here. Fortunately, with the name and reputation of Lewis Corporation, everything from the acquisition of the land down to the most minute detail has been smoothly carried out. The possibility of a mistake or delay is slim, but one never can be too careful.

“Make sure no problems arise,” I order, shooting William a glance. Squinting my eyes, I redirect my gaze to the large open lot where the skyscrapers will be standing in a few months.

“Understood.”

“This is Natalie’s first job as a project manager. She needs to prove her ability to the senior executives of Quinn Industries. Make sure to assist her whenever she needs something. These old farts are just waiting for her to make a mistake.”

William’s mouth curls into a smile before nodding in agreement. He takes the blueprints from my hand and briefs me on the things that need my attention.

Since I've been away from headquarters, work has been piling up.

"When are you going back to headquarters, sir?" he asks.

"Not until this project is over."

"Are you worried about Ms. Quinn?"

I frown. William has been my right-hand man since before Natalie even came into my life. He's one of the few people I'm close to, and my most trusted at that. But he's not the kind to pry, and always keeps his toes behind the line.

He's like a confidante, so I don't mind his question.

"Ms. Quinn is very capable," he ventures. "She gets along with her colleagues. She's very communicative with her team, as well. Ever since she started working, she has never sought my help. She's found her way out when she's stuck and solved problems on her own. She may be young, but she possesses the qualities of a good leader for Quinn Industries. She is very responsible."

"Mmm."

"Old Mr. Quinn would be very proud if he were here," he added, sounding like a proud dad.

My mouth curls into a smile at the mention of the old man. I became an orphan when I was just a toddler after my parents died in a plane crash. My grandfather raised me until I was twelve, when he passed due to cancer. Benedict Quinn, my grandfather's closest friend, treated me like I was his own, and trained me to become a competent businessman until I moved to San Francisco at nineteen to take over Lewis Corporation. It's been a long road, but I am grateful for everything. If it weren't for his dedicated guidance, I could never have been as competent at handling a business as big as Lewis Corporation.

My thoughts are broken when Natalie appears in my peripheral view. She is in a white casual blouse and faded jeans paired with sneakers. She's wearing a hard hat over her low ponytail. She's talking to one of the staff while pointing around,

then back to the blueprints she is holding. She looks radiant with her sun-kissed cheeks and her bright eyes, engaged and enlivened in her work.

A mixture of pride and guilt floods through me, my smile fading.

“Benedict would be happy to see her working hard to continue his legacy.”

“She’s quite a natural,” William comments, following my gaze.

“She is,” I agree.

Before too long, Natalie and a few people on her team, along with the construction manager, take notice of my presence and come to greet me. I nod in acknowledgment, signaling them to continue whatever they were doing. William leads me back to the car as my eyes linger on the beautiful woman who seems to be fully immersed in her work.

As if feeling my gaze, she tilts her head in my direction. She smiles brightly, her face flushed as if all her blood has come rushing to her cheeks. There’s something in her shy and innocent disposition that makes me want to grab her and kiss her right there, with no regard for anyone or anything else.

I bob my head lightly in acknowledgment before she hurriedly averts her eyes, making my heart swell a little.

It’s that strange feeling again.

I shake my head lightly as if it will erase the nonsensical thoughts, but before I can step inside the vehicle, a familiar figure of a man catches my attention.

It’s the same man who was at the banquet.

“Fancy seeing you here, Mr. Lewis,” he greets hurriedly. He’s panting as if he’s run ten laps.

I cock an eyebrow then eye his extended arm.

“Mason Moore, sir,” he introduces with a gallant smile, wiping a bead of sweat off his forehead with his free hand. Tucked under his arm is a rolled piece of paper which I presume to be a copy of the project blueprint.

“It’s nice to meet you, Engineer Moore. I hear you’ve been a great mentor to Natalie.”

I shake his hand perfunctorily.

The man chuckles as if he’s tickled by the mention of her name.

“Nat is a natural. She’s a fast learner, very attentive and efficient. You’d never guess she’s a rookie.”

My lips curl into a grin, amused by the mention of the woman’s apparent lack of work experience. If one weren’t astute enough, it would almost sound like a compliment.

“You seem to be very comfortable with Ms. Quinn, calling her nicknames.”

The man chuckles confidently. It’s almost a sneer, concealed by the bright smile on his youthful face. But it does not escape my scrutiny.

“Don’t be so stiff, Mr. Lewis. Nat and I are friends. We get along quite well. Formalities would be such a hassle when working together on projects that require burning the midnight oil.”

“Ms. Quinn is the heir of Quinn Industries,” I state authoritatively.

It isn’t a revelation, it’s a warning.

Everyone working for Lewis Corporation knows that Quinn Industries is only temporarily under my control until its heir is fully capable of managing it. On that note, it is known that Natalie Quinn is under my wing, and whoever dares to mess with her will be going against me. Until the time she holds the highest position in Quinn Industries, she will be prey to the people who are eyeing her company.

Threats have been looming from all corners, not only to her position but to her life as well.

The man stiffens for a moment but the smile on his face does not disappear. I give him another condescending look for good measure before finally getting inside the vehicle.

“Get a thorough investigation done on Mason Moore.”

William shoots me a confused look through the rearview mirror but does not probe further.

“Copy.”

CHAPTER II

NATALIE

“**Y**ou should watch your speed,” I remind Mason as the car halts to an abrupt stop at a red light. We’re riding in his Corvette on the way to the construction site. As the project manager, I need to visit the place three to four times a week for assessment to avoid any mistakes or setbacks. This morning, the man insisted on driving and my stupid self agreed, only to realize too late that it may be a shortcut to the afterlife.

He chuckles. “Oh, come on, Natalie. Don’t be such a killjoy.”

I clench my hand around the seatbelt, gritting my teeth, before tossing him a glare.

“I don’t give a shit if you want to visit St. Peter as early as today. But unlike you, I am still young and have a lot to live for.”

“Oh, really? Like what?” he taunts. “Hang on, I think I know...a hot love life?”

I roll my eyes, knowing that he’s just out to make fun of me. After two months of working with Mason, I’ve learned to shut my mouth to avoid being heckled. I still have no idea how he’s able to make a joke out of every single thing I say. It’s as if his reason for being is to annoy the hell out of me. If not for his

knowledge and guidance, I would have already tossed him to the curb. Mason is the type who is outgoing and mischievous. Sometimes, I wonder if having a big brother would be as exasperating as this.

“Whatever. I just want peace and safety.”

“Don’t worry! I’ll make sure you get home in one piece. Otherwise, your *future* boyfriend will kill me.”

He laughs heartily, making my blood boil. But before I can say another word, he steps on the accelerator, completely disregarding my word of caution. I feel like my soul has left my body and is still five miles back on the highway when the vehicle pulls over into the parking area.

“We’re here!” he announces, to which I only reply with a frown.

Without another word, Mason gets out of the car and sprints around to open the door for me. Cursing silently, I swear to myself never to hitch a ride with this man ever again.

Goddammit, what an immature pain in the ass!

“I hate you,” I murmur grumpily. Clutching my bag, I unfasten my seatbelt with my quivering hands. I can still feel my frantic heartbeat, but I don’t want to look like a sissy, so I ignore it.

It’s a mistake.

The desert wind is blowing rather strong, in vigorous gusts as I step out of the vehicle. As I try to stand straight, I feel my knees buckle. My world spins a little as my stomach churns. Before I know it, I lose my balance. Helplessly, I reach out for something to grab onto and close my eyes in panic at the idea of collapsing onto the sharp gravel covering the parking area.

With my bag in my right hand, I instinctively grasp onto the thing nearest to me with my left. My world does a 180-degree spin. The door of the car bangs loudly behind me. I become aware of my back resting against hot steel and crack my eye to peek.

I sigh heavily in relief.

“Easy...” Mason’s voice echoes in my ear, his warm breath brushing my cheek.

My eyes widen in horror when I find him staring down at me with our faces only a few inches apart. What the fuck just happened?!

“What the hell are you doing?” I spit, glaring back at him. I realize my hand is wrapped around his neck and abruptly retract it.

“What do you mean? You’re the one who pulled me in!”

He chuckles, his eyes softening.

“I didn’t know you were such a weakling,” he whispers as he pushes some stray hair to the back of my ear.

“Shut up! This is your fault! If you didn’t drive so fast, I wouldn’t have gotten dizzy!” I snap, tilting my head to avoid his gaze and pushing him away with both of my hands, deliberately putting distance between us.

He snorts. “Excuses. For all I know, you’ve been dying to be in my arms!”

“In your dreams! Only someone truly crazy would dream of being with you!” I joke.

“Ouch. That hurt.”

Mason clutches his chest dramatically with his hand, his brows furrowed, feigning pain. I laugh while lightly slapping his face away before squirming my way out of the constricted space.

It felt awkward and suffocating to be in such an intimate position with a man.

With another man...

“Stop being such a clown. We have work to do.”

I’m still laughing, but I freeze the instant I catch sight of a tall figure staring back at me. He’s standing right next to a black Maybach with both his hands in his pockets. The sunny, sweltering day is in complete contrast to the dark and grim expression on his face.

I thought he was in Vegas!

Derik stands a few yards away. He looks misplaced in his black custom suit against the desert dust clouds and sweaty blue-collar workers at the construction site.

I gulp, my heart beating wildly and my stomach twisting. It's been three days since the last time I saw him. No matter how busy I am, thoughts of him constantly linger in my mind. I've continued to wonder if that night he held me in his arms was imaginary or real.

I blink hard to be sure I'm not hallucinating.

I approach him, halting a few feet away.

"Get in," he orders.

Tears well behind my eyes, realizing that he is indeed real. I want to run and jump into his arms and hug and kiss him. But I refrain, knowing he's not one for public displays of affection and that he values composure, especially at work.

Only God knows how I yearn to be in his arms again.

"W-what?" I mumble, bewildered.

"I don't like repeating myself, Natalie," he warns, his jaw clenched.

"W-wait. But I have work to do."

Looking down, I focus my gaze on my sneakers like a bashful teenager. When he doesn't respond, I watch his leather shoes approach and stop a foot away from mine.

"Now!" He growls over me icily.

I flinch in fright, feeling a tear escape the corner of my eye.

Shit. What a baby!

Rooted to the ground, my hands grow sweaty, and my knees grow weak all over again. Tears begin to stream down my cheeks from the overwhelming mix of emotions. I open my mouth to speak but no words come out. So, I bow my head, not moving an inch.

CHAPTER 12

DERIK

Seeing Natalie cry strikes me to my core, accelerating my heartbeat. In the three years that I've known her, Natalie has never shed a tear in front of me. She's always put on a strong and independent face. What have I done to make her burst into tears like this?

Clenching my hands into fists, I sigh exasperatedly, lost for patience and not knowing how to coax her.

I never have been good with women, much less an emotional one. But seeing her in such a state makes my heart ache. It wasn't my intention to snap at her, but seeing her pressed up against Mason Moore made me see red. It took all my self-control to not grab him by the collar and beat the shit out of him.

I've never been the violent type, but I have an animal instinct that triggers when the protector in me senses a threat. I can't bear the idea of another man touching her.

"Don't cry..." I speak in as gentle a voice as I can muster, tilting her chin with my fingers so that our gazes meet. Her eyes and nose are red, making her look like a child throwing a tantrum. She pouts and then purses her lips petulantly.

When she looks away, it almost makes me laugh, but I hold it in. Since when has she been this adorable?

“Why are you here? I thought you were in Vegas,” she grumbles glumly as she takes a step away from my grasp.

I raise a brow then cross my arms over my chest, my gaze not leaving her face. She wipes her tears away and looks at me defiantly, but the beet-red blush on her cheeks betrays her front.

I snort then shrug.

“I came to check your work, of course,” I reply dismissively.

To ensure that she doesn’t get the wrong idea about our relationship, I’ve deliberately avoided her for several weeks. I knew that she was mad at me, but not to the point of wanting to move out. It was so sudden that I found myself helplessly agreeing.

I don’t want her to leave.

It’s my responsibility to ensure she’s comfortable and safe. But lately, it feels more like a personal need than an obligation—like her safety and comfort are more important than my own. It’s strange, but just the idea of her ever being harmed makes me anxious and enraged.

“There’s nothing for you to worry about. My team is of the highest caliber and has been working strenuously to guarantee the standards of Lewis Corporation are met and exceeded. You may look down on me, but I’m very professional when it comes to my work. Unlike someone, I take responsibility for everything I lay my hands on.”

I stiffen, feeling my brow twitch. Her words are sharper than usual today.

“That’s good. But let me remind you Ms. Quinn, work is not a place for you to flirt with your colleagues.”

She scoffs, glaring at me boldly.

“I wasn’t aware that *Mr. Lewis* has such a creative imagination.”

“Do I?”

The conversation is getting very petty, but she’s stirred the seething anger I’m trying hard to suppress.

“You don’t?”

Angrily, I grasp her upper arm and forcefully drag her toward the car. When she persistently protests with her little punches, I scoop her small figure into my arms and impatiently deposit her into the passenger seat.

“Behave,” I order, without waiting for her to respond before flinging the door shut.

As I stride around the hood of the car, I see Mason standing a few feet away with a blueprint tube in his hand. I shoot him a disdainful look before getting into the driver’s seat.

The flight from Las Vegas to Tucson wasn’t long, but the accumulation of restless nights is starting to take a toll on my mental state. Maybe that’s why I’m so irritable today.

Is it?

“I can see that you’re pissed off, but just because you’re my guardian doesn’t mean you have the right to make me your emotional punching bag.”

I grit my teeth as my hands grip the steering wheel.

“I have never done such a thing.”

“You’re doing it right now!”

I snort and tilt my head to face her, my mouth curling into a mocking grin.

“What a ridiculous accusation, Natalia”

She pauses, her eyes widening in surprise and rage, but quickly regains her composure and averts her gaze while securing her seatbelt.

“It’s Ms. Quinn, we’re at work,” she corrects.

“You’re in my car. This isn’t work,” I point out smugly, feeling impatient.

“Please—”

I swoop toward her, planting a small kiss on the corner of her mouth just so she'll shut up. Her breath is warm, and it smells a little like her favorite orange juice in the morning. The familiar rosy essence of her shampoo is gentle, yet the scent takes wild punches at my gut, and I find it hard to contain my longing to indulge in those soft, supple lips.

Her sinfully sweet, silky, tender lips...

She sits frozen as a pink blush creeps to her cheeks and up to the tips of her ears.

"I told you to behave, didn't I?" I whisper.

She opens her mouth to respond, but no sound comes out; she stares at me, baffled. I want to pull her in and kiss her ravenously, but before I can make a move, her eyes swell, and tears start streaming down her cheeks again.

Does this woman have a hidden well in those beautiful blue-green orbs?

I frown. What have I done now?!

CHAPTER 13

NATALIE

“S hhh...don’t cry,” Derik hums, hushing me. His voice is gentle, but the frown on his face remains. “Come on,” he goes on, wiping the tears off my cheeks with his thumb, his other hand tucking stray hairs behind my left ear.

I want to stop the tears, but they don’t seem to be responding, as if my nerves have lost connection to my brain. His gestures are overwhelming, and I can’t help but feel confused, angry, and comforted all at once. The tenderness and anxiety are evident in his eyes, as if he’s afraid he’ll injure me if he does something rash or raises his voice one decibel.

The cold, detached, and calculated Derik Lewis actually doesn’t know what to do for once!

“Don’t cry, hmm?” he coaxes.

Pursing my lips, I blink and sniff my nose.

Where did all these tears come from?

Why won’t they stop?

“I’m trying,” I sob, my voice cracking. “Do you think this is funny? You do what you want, whenever you want. You treat me like an object that you can

pick up whenever you feel like it and toss aside when you lose interest. I am not a fool, Derik. Don't touch me."

I tilt my head, avoiding his gaze when his mouth curls into an amused smile. He looks so handsome, despite my blurry vision. And here I am, crying like an idiot, looking pitifully ugly.

"You're not an object," he mumbles.

He inches closer, his lips brushing against the corner of my left eye. My heart flutters as if my nerves are jolted with tiny bolts of electricity. "You never were." He presses his lips on the lid of my right eye.

I shiver, feeling a river of warmth flood my center.

"I just lost my cool...that's all. I'm not mad."

I sob on, still unconvinced.

"Lost your cool? What the heck? Does that give you the right to invade my workplace and shove me into your car like I'm a sack of rice?"

He chuckles and then pinches my cheek.

"First of all, I am not invading. This project is under Lewis Corporation. So, technically I am your boss, correct? Secondly, you are indeed like a sack of rice. You're really quite heavy. Have you been pigging out? And, last but not least, I'm irritable because I haven't had enough sleep the past few days. Hence, my lack of patience and composure."

My jaw drops, amazed that he explained himself properly for once. I wasn't aware he could do that.

"This is probably a dream."

He raises his brow, puzzled.

"What?"

"The real Derik Lewis would never speak in full, coherent sentences. If this isn't a dream, then you're an imposter. Who are you and what have you done with that asshole?"

In response, he bursts into laughter which echoes through the narrow space of the vehicle. Squinting my eyes, I study his jubilant demeanor. The frown on his face is gone, and his shoulders have relaxed. His eyes aren't as empty as they used to be.

“You—you're laughing...” I point, gaping.

“I never knew you had a comical side to you,” he comments, leaning in. Then, he plants a kiss on my lips, gentle and slow at first, as if he's afraid he might break me. My breathing lightens when his tongue traces the outline of my lips, then leisurely enters, and explores the cavern of my mouth while sucking and urging me to reciprocate.

I'm already breathless when he pulls me in closer with his hand resting on the nape of my neck, the other slipping under my shirt. Moaning, I squirm against his chest, relishing his scorching touch.

Oh, how I missed his touch.

I link my arms around his neck and pull his kiss in deeper. His mouth is soft and sweet, and his touch electrifies my skin, sending me into a state of carnal bliss. When his palm cups my breast, I moan in pleasure.

He jerks away abruptly, leaving me desperately wanting more.

“That ought to tell you this is real,” he teases.

I scoff in annoyance but don't say a word, feeling breathless and on fire all over.

“Let's get out of here. I'm starving.”

He pulls away from me and starts the engine. Hurriedly, he maneuvers the car without a word. His chest rises and falls heavily, and I can feel and smell the lust in the air as he speeds up the familiar road home to the villa.

I'm still in a stupor when the car pulls into the driveway. Derik gets out, taking large strides around to my side, he throws open the passenger door and single-handedly scoops me into his arms. This time, it is swift and careful.

We're on the stairs, headed up to the second floor, when my mind finally clears.

"What are you doing?!" I ask in incredulity.

"Getting my meal," he answers flatly as he kicks the door of his study wide open with a bang. I gulp nervously when he places me on top of the large oak desk, his eyes lingering on my face. The usually icy cold stares have turned into a lustful gaze that seems to disrobe me of the façade of strength I've been putting on.

My tongue feels stuck to my throat as I examine him. He looks a little tired, but he's definitely fully sober. My heart brightens with hope, but I push it down, trying to hold onto my last bit of dignity.

"S-stop this," I stutter, trying my best to sound like I actually mean it. I sit up spine straight, feigning composure. "This is sexual harassment."

Derik pauses, his eyes twinkling in delight as he sits down on his office chair, watching me thoughtfully like a figurine. Then, he pulls himself closer, his arms planted on either side of my thighs, restricting my movements. He stands again.

"You and your mouth..."

I raise a brow, feeling indignant, but rather than fight, I assume a blasé air.

"I'll go and tell Mrs. Whittle to prepare your lunch. You must be tired. You should rest. I'll do you a favor and forget what you did today. I expect it won't happen again."

Derik pauses and meets my gaze before letting out an exasperated sigh. His expression softens for a moment before he lowers his head to rest on my lap. Frowning, I look down to see his shoulders relaxing.

"William took Mrs. Whittle to the hospital. She tripped and fell while trimming the hydrangea this morning," he murmurs, his hands slithering around my waist.

I sigh impatiently, feeling a shudder running down my spine.

“You’re acting strange.”

“Mmmh?”

“Why are you so talkative?” I question suspiciously.

“I’m not.”

“You’re acting like a cat, too.”

If he wasn’t Derik, I would have already kicked his balls for crossing the line way too many times in the span of an hour. I want to scream and slap him hard for fucking with my emotions like this. At the same time, I want to hug and kiss him. I want him to touch me. I want to tell him how I feel. But I don’t know where or how to start, or if it’s worth the risk.

“I just want to be near you. Your energy relaxes me.”

My brows twitch.

“What are you talking about? While you’re riling me up, I’m relaxing you?”

“You’re not allowed to get close to anyone like this. Otherwise, you’d have to bail me out of jail,” he mutters, a tinge of anger and possessiveness in his voice.

I fall silent for a moment, my eyes gazing through the glass walls. The lotus flowers floating on the calm waters of the pond are in bloom. My mouth breaks into a smile when I finally understand what Derik is talking about. I feel my heart swelling with happiness.

Is he jealous?

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, Mr. Lewis,” I say, feigning ignorance.

“Stay away from that bastard, mmmh?”

“Who?”

“Mason Moore.”

I laugh, combing my fingers through his dark hair.

“Why? Are you jealous?” I tease.

He scoffs.

“Me? Derik Lewis? Hell no!”

I giggle and roll my eyes, tickled by his childishness. Knowing his personality, spitting out the actual words would be like swallowing needles. A proud man like him would never admit something so vulnerable as jealousy.

Still... I feel happy.

It's enough for me to know that I have a space in his thorny heart.

“Mason is a senior engineer at Quinn Industries. He's been a good mentor to me. Whatever you saw, it meant nothing. He was driving like a madman and I was nauseous when I got out of the car. He was just supporting me when I lost my balance.”

He looks up at me with a frown and disgust on his face. His eyes are a little droopy.

“You don't know him. Keep your distance. He's a dangerous man.”

I raise a brow, throwing him a suspicious look. Derik may come off as a jackass when it comes to his words, but he never says anything he doesn't mean.

“What do you mean?”

“I'll tell you soon enough,” he says softly. His hands move across my back, expertly snapping open the hook of my bra with a single move. “Now, can I please get my meal? I'm starving.”

Wide-eyed, I gape at his face only to realize that he was just laying his trap all along. His eyes glow with desire. How could I have fallen into this unscrupulous plot?

I sneer.

“Tell me, Mr. Lewis, have you been having a dry spell?” I mock him mischievously, pushing his large figure back onto his chair. I slip off the desk and straddle his lap. “Did you rush your work to fly back here?”

His jaw clenches as a tinge of red creeps to the tip of his ears.

“I'm an efficient worker. Finishing early is a given,” he replies matter of fact.

Squirming against his wide chest, I rotate my hips slowly, brushing my crotch against his as my arms link around his neck. When I feel him tense up, I lean closer so that my lips swiftly brush his jawline.

“Did you miss me that much?” I tease, meeting his gaze.

“Shut up,” he mumbles as he reaches up to loosen his tie.

“Did your heart ache when you saw me cry?”

“Shut up.”

“Were you jealous when you saw me with Mason?”

“Shut up.”

“Surely, you don’t mean that.”

“Woman, stop this nonsense!” he protests.

“You don’t mean that either,” I chuckle, feeling him growing hard against my jeans. His breathing is hot and heavy. I smile and muster the courage to take the initiative. I grasp his tie and pull him in, eagerly kissing his lips, expressing my longing and anticipation. I move my body to create friction against his clothes as I take his hand and guide it beneath my shirt, softly biting his bottom lip.

“Touch me,” I murmur against his mouth.

With my consent, Derik hoists me up. He wraps one hand around my waist, the other under my ass, as he rises from his seat. Nibbling against my neck, he smoothly strides across the room and hall, making his way to the master bedroom. After laying me on his large bed, he admires the throbbing area of skin on my neck where he’s just marked me, as if he’s completed a work of art.

Impatiently, he undresses me, his eyes roaming across my nakedness, his gaze burning with lust as if he’s ready to devour me witless. I shiver at the thought, gaping at his hard pecks when he strips his shirt off.

I gulp. His abs are a level of perfection that even billboard models can’t hold a candle to.

“Like what you see?” he asks gruffly.

I look away, my cheeks heated from embarrassment. Sure, we've made love once before, but we're in broad daylight now, the sun tossing beams across the bed like spotlights. Every part of his body, every movement he makes, is illuminated. It feels sinful to witness such a beautifully sculpted creature standing before me, now fully nude.

"Are you shy now?"

His magnetic voice is breathy, as if he's having a hard time speaking.

I nod then shake my head.

He chuckles.

I'm still unable to make up my mind when he encircles me in his arms, peppering kisses along my collarbones. His mouth travels down my belly as his hands find their home on my breasts, kneading them fervidly. I swallow a moan in my throat, only for it to escape like a shriek.

"God, you're so sexy," he whispers sensuously, lifting my leg. He plants small kisses on my thigh that send streams of titillation up through my center, making my entire body contract. When our gazes lock again, he looks at me calculatedly and flirtatiously. Slowly, he leans in and devours my lips like a hungry beast. I lick his bottom lip and suck his tongue, my mind letting go of rationality.

He tastes sweet and minty.

Floating on a pool of pure pleasure, I place a hand on his nape, pulling him closer to deepen the kiss. His mouth is soft, and the tenderness of his approach is driving me insane. With my free hand, I caress his arousal, feeling him tense with my touch.

Pulling away, he shoots me a dirty look while parting my legs wider. I struggle against the sheets with my cheeks growing hotter while he studies my wet entrance with darkened eyes. He reaches out and slips his long middle finger into my mouth. Before I can react, he takes it out and slides it inside my pussy.

I yelp in surprise, but when he slides his finger in and out, I whimper, feeling my insides quiver and convulse. My hands grasp the sheets while my hips rotate to match his rhythm. He takes it out of my pussy and places it in his mouth, sucking off my juices.

“Hmm... sweet.”

I’m burning hot.

“Derik...”

“Hmm?”

“I-I...please don’t make me wait any longer,” I whisper shamelessly.

He cups my ass with both hands, slightly lifting me off the bed as he slowly runs his tongue along my center. I gasp in ecstasy with my toes curled.

“I didn’t hear that,” he murmurs in a low, vibrating hum against my clit.

“Oh, please. Just fuck me, please!” I breathe desperately, unable to find the words to express my need. Hearing this, Derik looks up at me, a glimmer of excitement flashing in his gray eyes.

He positions himself at my entrance and forces himself inside me in a single thrust.

“Fuck! You’re so big!” I shriek.

“Why...thank you.”

He lifts my butt and adjusts himself inside me. Closing my eyes, I breathe deeply to relax, waiting for the pain to subside, accommodating his length and proud thickness. Tearfully, I dig my nails into his back, hoping to make him realize how painful it is. He’s so big, I feel like he might tear me in two.

“Jesus, Natalie!” he groans as he unsheathes himself from me, slathered in my juices.

I sense surprise and thrill in his voice.

“Shut up.”

Derik chuckles heartily as he plants another kiss on my temple. He gently reenters, moving slowly and shallowly at first then picking up pace, pounding me harder, deeper, and faster. My moans are muffled against his mouth as I lock my legs around his waist.

I'm losing my mind with the overpowering pleasure engulfing my entire being. I feel like I'm floating on air mixed with the smell of sweat and lust. The sound of panting and the slapping of skin echoes in my ears as our bodies join, slamming together repeatedly. As I near my climax, I feel Derik growing inside me, and his pace hastens.

"Ohh..." he grunts. "Ohh...ohh...ohh..."

I reach down and rub my clit for additional stimulation, guttural moans escaping my throat when he bites my collarbone. Derik rotates his hips as I meet his every thrust, hitting all the right places, drawing out my orgasm. My eyes flutter and my muscles tighten and quiver violently with the sensations as sparks go off in my vision. My toes curl up and my back arches as I let out a scream of pleasure, receiving his one last, deep thrust, pushing me far over the edge into some exhilarating state I've never before experienced.

"Ohhh..." we moan simultaneously.

We came together.

And somehow, it feels like we're one.

Derik claims me one more time before collapsing at my side. He plants a kiss on my forehead and holds me in his arms, inhaling my sweaty aroma. Just like the first night, we bathe in comfortable silence until our breathing slows.

"Welcome back," I murmur wearily, completely spent.

"I'm home," he hums.

My mouth curls contentedly as I feel his lips brush against my shoulder.

He's home.

CHAPTER 14

DERIK

Watching Natalie sleeping serenely at my side makes my heart swell. This is different from the first time we were together. This time, I'm consumed by a feeling of relief and a kind of warmth compelling me to be someone who could give her the world. Her head has been resting on one of my arms for hours, but it seems to never get sore beneath her lightless.

I tenderly stroke her hair, admiring her. She's sleeping soundly, but the rosy glow on her cheeks remains. She looks like a porcelain doll, delicate and exquisitely beautiful.

Grinning mindlessly, I pull her in and bury my face in her hair, inhaling her natural scent. Her smell is addicting, and I can never get enough of it. For the past few weeks, I've been adamantly avoiding her, fighting to shut down all thoughts and feelings toward her...but it's only made me realize how severely her absence affects me. I struggle to eat and can't sleep.

She's like oxygen to me; I feel like I'm suffocating without her.

I hesitate to admit it, but I would be lying to myself if I denied missing her intensely every minute I'm not next to her. My time away made me realize that I've always looked forward to eating meals with her, which has improved my

own health over these past few years. In the entire time we've lived together, I have never once skipped a meal, just to make personally sure that she is well fed.

It's become a habit—she, too, is one.

But of course, these thoughts will remain with me alone. Spitting out sweet nothings never has been my style, and as astute a person as she is, I'm confident she understands.

My attention is jolted back to reality when my ringtone comes blasting from my phone. I move out of bed as swiftly as possible to avoid waking her and dig my phone out from the pile of clothes lying on the floor.

I hit the phone button, grabbing a cigarette pack and lighter from the drawer after slipping into a bathrobe. This call will take longer than usual.

“What's up?” I greet unenthusiastically as I step out onto the balcony, closing the French door partially behind me.

“Try not to sound so happy to hear from me, bro.”

The man on the line is Ashton Kingsley. He's one of my childhood friends and became my fraternity brother when we both attended Stanford. We rarely contact each other, but when he does reach out, I know it's something important.

“Cut it out. What do you want?” I grumble, lighting the cigarette hanging from my lips. My voice is low, making sure I don't disturb the woman under the sheets.

The man chuckles.

“So impatient. Did I disturb you?”

“Spill.”

“I've uncovered something interesting from twenty-three years ago. The news about our parents' deaths was completely suppressed for three months before it became public. Isn't that strange? Business magnates dying on a plane crash together didn't even make headlines!”

Ashton's family holds almost eighty percent of the business in multi-media, from newspapers, broadcasting networks, films, advertisements, and now even the digital market. His father's death alone could take the news by storm. How much more the death of the previous chairman of Lewis Corporation that dominated real estate, banking, and agricultural industries? Especially when they died together?

"Go on," I urge.

"Do you remember why our parents went on that trip together?"

I scratch my nose before taking another drag from the cigarette. It's an old memory I've buried in the depths of my mind.

"Vacation."

"My grandfather told me before it happened that Lewis Corp and Sterling Group had plans to venture into oil and mining. I was young when I heard this, and I wasn't sure what was wrong with it."

"Stop beating around the bush, Kingsley. What's your point?"

Ashton and I were never convinced that the plane crash from twenty-three years ago was merely a malfunction of the airplane as it was reported. At first, we thought it was a terrorist attack. But now, things are getting a bit more interesting.

"The oil and mining industry is big. We both know that. The people in it always want to monopolize the market. Many businessmen dabble in it but never make a breakthrough. Back then, oil prices were dependent on—"

"Wars."

My brows knit further as I stare blankly at the dark horizon. This information is new, unprecedented, and complicated.

"Well..."

"Lie low for now. I'm sure whoever is behind it still has eyes and ears out."

"Nah, those bastards can't touch me..."

Ashton laughs dismissively. I can easily imagine that usual playful smirk on his face.

“Regardless.”

“I’ve made sure my existence is well-known to the public. Why do you think I’ve been living frivolously all these years?”

Putting out the cigarette butt, I press my temples, feeling a headache coming on. It’s still a mystery to me that a person—a literal genius who skipped years of education—like Ashton can carry on all these years carelessly living as a philanderer and socialite.

“Don’t you think your actions are way too bold and obvious?”

The man laughs.

“The media sensationalizes everything. If those people were watching me, they would know what goes on in reality. How about you? Are you still babysitting that chick from the Quinns? I hear she’s quite a looker. Why don’t you introduce me?”

“Shut the fuck up. You’ll never touch her,” I warn, my voice low and heavy with hostility.

I know he’s just joking, but it triggers something dominant and protective in me.

“Pft. Chill, bro. I’ll catch you later, then.”

With that, the call ends. As men of the same status, we have a tacit understanding of things. Business isn’t all about making profits and expansion. It involves not only the economic stability of a country, but political equilibrium as well. Countless lives depend on firms to survive. Now that we’ve uncovered an unpleasant truth, we’ll need to tread on thin lines.

I sigh heavily.

The deceased are gone, and the living shall continue to persist. But as my parents’ child, I ought to bring them justice. It’s something I swore to do the

moment I inherited the company. It might take time, but I will expose this corruption.

“What are you thinking?” a soft voice whispers as a pair of delicate arms wrap around my waist. There’s a tinge of concern in her voice.

“Nothing.”

“Derik, I know I’m young and inexperienced in a lot of things, but you can always tell me if something is bothering you. I may not be able to help, but I can be a listening ear.”

I chuckle as I turn to face her. She looks at me expectantly, her eyes reflecting the dim light coming from the moon, her lips pursed and her cheeks red.

She sniffs and my gaze lands on her bare shoulders as she stands before me, wrapped in my sheet, her hair messy.

“Get inside. You’ll catch a cold,” I order.

She pouts, continuing to stand rooted in her spot.

“You don’t take me seriously at all! Why do I even bother?!”

I hold her shoulders with my hands and pull her in for a hug. Her concern is enough to remind me that I’m not alone anymore.

Right.

I need to protect her, too.

“I was just thinking about having a proper meal.”

“W-what are you talking about? W-we c-can’t cook. The attendants have gone to sleep,” she stammers as she buries her face in my chest like a kitten.

“I want to eat, hmm?” I whisper huskily.

There’s a long silence before she pushes me away. She marches back into the bedroom without sparing another glance. When I hear a loud bang coming from a slamming door, I burst out laughing.

CHAPTER 15

NATALIE

“I can’t believe you’ve been in Tucson for almost three months now and you didn’t tell me!” Kelsi Stoval, my high school best friend, complains after setting her shot glass down on the table. Crossing her long legs, she narrows her eyes, studying me suspiciously.

It’s Friday night, and we’re hanging out in a VIP room of one of the nightclubs she owns downtown. Kelsi is the mayor’s daughter. She never had any interest in politics and established a name for herself by building her own businesses.

“Oh, please. Stop looking at me like that.”

Rolling my eyes, I wave a hand to dismiss whatever she’s thinking. She has a knack for coming up with the worst guesses in the world. We haven’t seen each other for almost five years, since I moved to Los Angeles after high school graduation.

Regardless, we keep in touch from time to time.

“Something’s different with you...” she comments, her head cocked to one side.

I raise my brow, sipping from my wine glass. I have a good alcohol tolerance, but since I'm driving, I opted for a bottle of wine. It's better to be safe than sorry.

"Like what?"

"You look... radiant."

I pause, almost choking.

"What? Are you saying that I usually look dull?"

"No, I mean...it's just different. You're glowing. If I didn't know better, I'd think you're expecting or something. Are you even dating anyone these days?"

Taken aback, I blink frantically as my pulse speeds up. With a shaking hand, I set my glass down, my mind automatically counting the days of my menstrual cycle.

Seeing my reaction, she gasps exaggeratingly, her eyes wide and her mouth ajar.

"No, you're not!"

My cycle is usually normal, but since I started working, it's seemed that my hormones have been thrown off balance due to stress. After all, I'm still under rigorous training, thanks to Derik's fascism. I have to multitask, with two to three projects that are not even under Quinn Industries, and attend a few private online business classes arranged by William. Twenty-four hours seem to not be enough time in a day.

Plus, Derik... that brute seems to have endless energy!

"Earth to Natalie..."

The sound of Kelsi's snapping fingers pulls me back to the present as I blink at her cluelessly. Could I possibly be...

I couldn't be it, right?

"I-I don't know..." I mumble helplessly.

"For real! When was the last time you had your period? Even teenagers know how to use contraceptives, how could you possibly be this careless!"

I sigh, trying to regain my composure as I watch her frustrated expression, her brows furrowed. I can even see the faint appearance of a protruding nerve on her forehead.

Damn this woman and her wild imagination!

“Would you relax? Why are you panicking? I am not pregnant.”

My words don't come out as convincing as I'd intended, but I need to believe it myself. The situation is already too complicated.

She scoffs, eyeing me up and down before crossing her arms.

“Why are you shaking then?” she challenges.

“You just surprised me! I did *not* expect you to throw something so ridiculous at me!”

“It's Derik, right?”

I shake my head, realizing she's just leading me on.

“You're getting good at this. I almost believed you were really concerned for me,” I mock.

“I *am* concerned...” she objects, wiggling her brows mischievously. “But I'm curious, too. Come on, spill it. When did it happen?”

It isn't a secret between us that I used to have a crush on him. Plus, it wouldn't require much intuition or experience for anyone to raise an eyebrow at the situation. Logically speaking, it would be improbable for two straight adults of the opposite sex, living under the same roof for so long, to never get entangled with each other.

She pauses, her inquisitive gaze making me feel awkward.

“Are you guys officially an item?” she probes when I don't respond.

Shaking my head, I avert my gaze, feeling my cheeks heating up. Kelsi is the kind who lives freely. She is very open-minded. But she's neither conservative nor liberal, having her own ideals and refusing to fit into any boxes.

“I-I...I don't know.”

“Don’t tell me you’re in a situationship?”

I sigh with resignation.

My relationship with Derik has changed considerably for the better lately. He may not be too expressive with his words, but his actions make me feel at ease. He’s a man who does things his way, and just the fact that he’d rush work and fly back to Tucson in between his busy schedule is enough to make my heart melt. Unlike before, he’s also started sharing personal details about himself with me and asking me about things that I enjoy. We’re getting to know each other on a deeper level.

It feels like we’re dating.

But without the affirmation.

“I know he cares for me. His actions tell me so.”

That was a stupid statement.

But then again, it seems everyone goes stupid when they fall in love.

“Didn’t he always care? After all, he’s your guardian,” Kelsi points out, making me flinch.

“It’s different this time. He’s gentler. It’s like I’m getting to know another side of him, the real him. He’s opened up a lot.”

Kelsi clicks her tongue and fills her glass with wine before gulping it down. She offers me an empathetic look before shaking her head.

“Whatever. It’s not like I can do anything about it. You’re responsible for your own actions. I’d get a pregnancy test if I were you. And make sure you use contraceptives from here on out. For people with status like the two of you, it would be controversial to get pregnant. You know what I mean, right?”

“But what if—”

“And you need to tell him. Do not decide on your own. It takes two hands to clap, Nat.”

“Right.”

Diverting the conversation, I ask her about things involving business, which she seems happy to discuss. Just to be safe, she has her staff remove all the liquor from the table and orders a massive plate of loaded nachos and Shirley Temples. We spend the next two hours catching up and talking about random things.

I'm surprised at how good it feels to spend time with a friend outside of work. It's been so long, I've forgotten that I need this kind of connection and leisure time. Over the last six years, I've mostly just studied my ass off. The last few years of that I've been training to run my business, and recently that training has been far more than full-time. I need more time to just relax and enjoy life a little.

When I excuse myself to use the restroom, I receive a call from Jonas. He's a junior engineer and part of the team that is working on the current business center project. Why would he be calling me outside of working hours?

Frowning, I answer hesitantly.

"What's wrong?" I ask, feeling a little agitated.

"Ms. Quinn, we have a problem! The foundation built for the main building of the business center collapsed!"

Frozen in sudden shock, I feel a cold rush running down my spine. The evident panic in the man's voice tells me that things are serious. I swallow, grasping for rationality. The project was supposed to be flawless! I made sure everything was of the best caliber! Foundation collapse? How could this happen?!

Gripping my phone, I heave a deep breath and muster as much courage as I can. My heart is throbbing hard. Blood rises to my head, making me light-headed, but this is not the time to panic.

I need to remain calm and sensible in this situation if I'm going to navigate this with the best possible outcome.

“Has the area been secured? Call 911 if no one has yet. Contact Mason and meet me at the site.”

Taking large strides, I head back toward the VIP room.

“I’m already here. A rescue team has arrived, too. There were people working the graveyard shift who got buried under it. Please come as soon as possible.”

“Alright. I’ll be right there!”

When I shove the door open, Kelsi looks at me in bewilderment.

“What’s wrong? You look terrible!”

Clenching my teeth, I close my eyes and count for three seconds in my head. I heave a series of deep breaths, hoping that it will help calm my nerves. It’s a futile attempt.

How can I relax when there are lives at stake and I’m the one responsible?

“Something happened at my building site. I have to go. I’ll call you!”

Without batting an eye, I grab my purse and dash across the club, anxiously making my way to the parking area. Within minutes, I’m speeding up the highway. Fortunately, I only drank two glasses of wine. My vision is clear, and the more I step on the accelerator, the more my mind sharpens.

The building plans were checked over a hundred times by some of the best experts in the industry. The calculations were perfect. There is no way it could fail. As the project manager, I’ve ensured that Quinn Industries provided top-notch designs, manpower, and materials. I’ve checked everything personally, down to the minutest detail, knowing that this venture is a test of my capabilities, not only as an engineer but as a team player and a leader.

Unless...someone intended for me to fail.

The idea flashes in my mind as I floor the gas, ignoring several red lights. It’s the dead of night, and there is no traffic. Every second is precious and the need to arrive at the site is making my skin crawl.

Sabotage.

This word echoes in my mind as I speed up the two-lane road. Immersed in my thoughts, I squint my eyes when I see headlights approaching up ahead.

Shit!

Instinctively, I make a swerve to my right, only to see the faint light of another vehicle advancing in my direction. Alarmed, I hit the brakes abruptly. The sound of screeching tires rings in my ears as my body slams hard against my seat with the sudden impact, immediately followed by an almost knockout punch to my face by the airbag. I feel my world spin multiple times and my mind goes blank as a series of deafening crashing sounds register. My ears ache and my head throbs. My eyes water at the searing pain in my neck when the final strike comes, putting my car to a definite halt.

The smell of burned rubber rouses my senses.

Covered in shattered glass, droplets of warm liquid fall on my lashes, blurring my vision further. My body grows numb, and I feel so drained of energy I struggle to even blink.

Is this how I'm going to die?

Gritting my teeth, I extend my arm and reach for my phone on the passenger seat, I press the speed dial with excruciating effort.

Please... I need you...

A familiar husky voice comes through, "Where are you?"

My mouth curls into a weak smile then my eyelids drop.

I'm here...

CHAPTER 16

DERIK

“How is she?” I ask the doctor anxiously.
The three-hour-long surgery is finally over, but the worry that’s been eating me alive continues as I pace back and forth across the waiting area. I’ll never forgive myself if she doesn’t make it.

William and I just arrived from Los Angeles for an investor’s meeting. Seeing the call from Natalie excited me. It never crossed my mind that she would be in a life-threatening situation.

Gritting my teeth, I watch the middle-aged doctor remove his mask.

“She is stable. Her body sustained multiple injuries from the impact and broken glass. Her neck received severe impact. She will have to wear a cast and will be uncomfortable. As for her left leg...” the man trails off before releasing a deep breath. “We performed a bone fracture repair surgery. It will take twelve weeks to heal.”

I gulp hard, feeling my muscles tense.

“Will she be able to heal completely?”

“She’s young and healthy. I expect she will make a full recovery,” the doctor affirms, tapping my shoulder with a hand. His reassuring smile calms my nerves

a bit. “Her condition will be tightly monitored, Mr. Lewis.”

“Thank you.”

Upon my instruction, William has dispatched several teams of bodyguards to secure all entrances and exits of the hospital building. In the recovery room is the highly skilled unit of female bodyguards that I have assigned to be her shadow.

After my conversation with Ashton, I’d hired a group of mercenaries to ensure her safety, but to no avail; they were unable to protect her from the car accident.

“What happened?” I question Kamila, the squad leader. Her dark, sharp eyes glint with remorse as she stares back at me. Without delay, she reiterates everything that happened.

As it turns out, Natalie was the one who ignored all the traffic rules as she sped up to the site. She was panic-stricken, causing the collision. Nodding my head, I command Kamila to stand guard 24/7 and report anything suspicious.

By morning, Mrs. Whittle and Mrs. Lindt arrive. There are things I need to personally attend to, and leaving Natalie in their hands will put my mind at ease.

“I’ll be back,” I murmur softly while stroking Natalie’s ashen cheek. Gently, I kiss the back of her cold hand, hoping to share my warmth with her weakened body.

Turning on my heel, I harden my heart and exit the ward quietly. William is already waiting in the lobby, his eyes bloodshot. He is sipping from a Styrofoam cup which I presume to contain coffee. The man looks tired, but his expression is attentive as he spots me walking over.

“Sir...” he acknowledges, rising from his seat.

Waving a hand, I take the seat next to him. He’s been working nonstop with me, and I tasked him last night with settling the issue with the business center that collapsed. The two of us keenly monitored this project and knew that with

Natalie's leadership, everything was up to the best standards. A collapse was out of the question unless a severe unforeseen natural disaster occurred.

"We already have Mason Moore, sir."

"Mmmh."

A few minutes later, William and I are in the vehicle, taking an unfamiliar road deep into the desert. After an hour, the car stops in front of an old building that looks like it was ravaged by fire before being completely abandoned. In front of the entrance stands a tall, broad man in a black suit, looking like he has been waiting for our arrival.

"Sir..." he greets with a salute.

Squinting my eyes, I acknowledge the man as the head of the guards with a light nod. He leads us to the second floor, where a few more guards stand outside a locked door. They open the entrance, revealing a dark and dusty room. A small light hangs in the center, casting shadows throughout the dank atmosphere as my eyes land on the man tied to a steel chair beneath it.

"Wake him," William commands, his voice echoing eerily across the room. He brings out an empty chair and gestures for me to sit. "They seized him at the casino after they heard of the collapse of the main building."

I scoff disdainfully as I settle onto the chair and cross my ankle over my opposite knee. I watch the men throw a bucket of water on Mason's face. When he comes to, he looks at me murderously as he spits on the floor.

"What do you want from me?"

"I've underestimated you, Moore."

He laughs hysterically, eyeing me triumphantly.

"I knew you'd been snooping on me, Lewis. As sharp as you are, you're still no match for me. A man must know how to accept defeat. Even Natalie bought my outstanding acting skills!"

My jaw clenches.

“You are not to utter her name.”

“Oh? Why? Does it make you feel *jealous*?” Mason mocks.

Smirking, I rise from my seat and step closer to him. I circle him slowly twice, then kick the chair hard from the back, thrusting it forward, causing him to fall face-first. The man groans in pain. Walking to his side, I flip the chair over roughly, then step on his neck, putting enough pressure to choke him until his eyes bulge and redden.

“You killed your own brothers, raped and knocked off women, and you even attempted to fake an accident for your father...bold of you to dare to touch *my* Natalie with those filthy hands.”

Pressing my shoe harder, my vision darkens as the memory of him holding Natalie in the parking area surfaces. With a sinister smile, I take a cigarette from my pocket and light it. Removing my foot, I take several long drags and gesture for a guard to lift the chair up.

Mason’s cocky, dangerous gaze is plastered on me. He spits again as the blood from the wound on his forehead flows down to the corner of his mouth.

“Natalie is a lovely girl. She is good at her work. But a greenhorn like her will never be capable of running Quinn Industries—”

“So, who is?” I laugh dryly. “A madman like yourself?”

Mason cackles.

“My grandfather helped build the company. My father was the one who strengthened its influence in the market while that spoiled bitch enjoyed a carefree life. I dedicated years—”

“I’m not here to listen to the ignorant ramblings of a twisted, illegitimate bastard.”

“You can’t prove anything, Lewis.”

“Oh? I wouldn’t be who I am today if I were as incompetent as you are...” I retort, turning on my heels to gesture for the men to cover his mouth. Bending

down, I take another drag and press the cigarette against his neck. The man grunts in pain; his knuckles whitening. I repeat my actions a few more times, until the cigarette is put out.

Tiring of him and this game, I instruct the head of the guards to do as they will with him, then make to leave.

“He is not to die,” I order.

Without another word, William and I head back to the villa. I take a quick shower and personally head out to meet with Mason’s father while William heads to the site to ensure a speedy resolution of the incident.

As the next largest shareholder of Quinn Industries, Arthur Moore will be in charge of facing the media regarding the scandal of the collapsed building. If Natalie is to take over the company, she will need not only a strong senior supporter, but a larger number of shares to have control. This man is the key.

The meeting with Arthur is quick and effective. With enough pressure from Lewis Corporation and irrefutable evidence of Mason’s countless crimes, we settle with Natalie gaining over fifty percent of the shares along with the man’s irrevocable support.

CHAPTER 17

NATALIE

“**H**eyyy...” a low, masculine voice rouses my senses. “I’m back...” he whispers. Slowly, I peel my eyes open to see a familiar figure sitting next to my bed. I squint, adjusting to the light, when I’m hit by the striking scent of antiseptic, inducing a wave of nausea.

I gulp, trying to process my current situation. My neck is supported with a cervical collar, restricting any kind of movement, and my left leg feels heavy, hard, and immovable.

“When the anesthetic wore off, she was given a dose of antibiotics and painkillers to relieve her pain,” Mrs. Whittle’s soft voice mumbles, walking to the other side of my bed, her wrinkly forehead crumpled with worry.

She must have been terrified.

Out of the corner of my eyes, I watch Derik gently lift my hand to his cheek. The concern is evident in his beautiful grey eyes. He sits, staring at me patiently, as he plants small kisses on the backs of my palms.

“W-water...” I mutter, feeling parched.

Quickly, Mrs. Whittle brings a cup of water. When I open my mouth, Derik takes it away and pulls a cotton ball from seemingly nowhere. He soaks it and

presses it gently against my mouth, dabbing as lightly as possible.

“Let me...” he tells the old lady. Though hazy, Mrs. Whittle’s suspicion does not escape my gaze, which makes a giggle flow out of me that sounds like a long and loud groan.

“What are you thinking?” Derik questions, cocking an eyebrow. His voice is low and his tone is soft, almost sounding like a hum from an aria. Coaxing me to relax, he strokes my cheek a few times before putting away the water.

From the corner of my eye, I watch Mrs. Whittle standing anchored to the side of the bed wearing a scrutinizing expression on her face. The woman is probably too stunned to react. If I hadn’t been privy to the man’s gentler side, I would be surprised, too.

After all, it’s rare to witness Derik Lewis attentively ‘serving’ somebody.

I cough, clearing my throat, earning myself another kiss on the hand. As if getting the signal, Mrs. Whittle quietly turns and exits the room, giving us some space and privacy.

“How long have I been out?” I ask as thoughts from the accident start rushing to my mind. “What about the project? Derik, you know how much time and effort I poured into this project!”

Derik sighs huffily.

“You’re in this state and, still, all you can think about is work? I’m very disappointed in you, Natalie Quinn.”

His brows knit together, followed by a flash of exasperation mixed with anger in his bloodshot eyes. I’m in the hospital, though. No matter what, he won’t bark and get mad at me, right?

“I-I’m just worried that things have gotten so messy. Are there any casualties?” I continue with my jaw clenched, feeling helpless while my heartbeat starts to race. I was supposed to be there for them. It was my responsibility to ensure their safety while completing the project.

How could I not worry?

Derik sighs in resignation.

“William has settled everything. There were over twenty people who were buried under the rubble. Fortunately, they were rescued in time. They’re being treated here in this hospital.”

I sigh in relief.

Before losing consciousness, I’d told myself repeatedly that if people died at the site, their blood would be on my hands. I feel guilty.

“Have you...” I trail off, pursing my lips as the worry turns into anger. “Did you find out who did it?”

He hums in response.

As expected, a seasoned businessman like him would have the problem settled as soon as possible. Derik is ruthless and unforgiving. If he has to cripple or seize command of another company, he will do it, especially if it’s for the benefit of so many other people.

“So, how did he do it?”

“You seem like you already know who’s behind it.”

“Mason?”

When he nods, I can’t help but scoff at myself. How could I not have seen it?

“He switched the materials to substandard ones. It was my mistake for underestimating his means. Don’t blame yourself. The man is a demon. The lesson for you here is to always be on guard. Your safety should be your top priority at all times.”

He pauses and stares at me intently with gritted teeth.

“God, I would never forgive myself if something happened to you!”

Looking into his eyes, I feel his grip tightening around my hand. My heart swells with warmth. It’s the first time he’s ever spoken with such emotion that his voice cracked. I curl my mouth and reach out to touch his handsome face.

“Why? Did you realize how empty you’d be if I died?”

“Nonsense. Not going to happen.”

I grin as I feel him tense up under my touch. A glint of wariness and fear crosses his eyes.

“Hmmm. How unromantic,” I complain, pouting.

He sighs.

Then, he rises from his seat and lowers his head, planting a gentle kiss on my forehead. His kiss is so tender it feels like a brush of warm summer breeze touching my face. I blink frantically as I feel my cheeks burning. Before I can react, I feel his lips landing on the tip of my nose, my eyes, and my cheeks.

“Your question is invalid. You’re never allowed to leave me in the first place.”

Flustered, I feel my tongue stuck in my throat, my heart racing so hard and loud that I worry he might be able to hear it.

I bite my bottom lip.

What does he mean by not allowed? It’s not like death would seek his permission.

“And if such a thing ever happens, you won’t be alone. I’ll be with you,” he adds, as if reading my thoughts.

I shiver.

You won’t be alone. I’ll be with you.

Those words may not sound sweet and cheery, but they’re more than enough to unburden all the insecurity that’s been weighing on my heart. He may not utter customary lines about love and yearning, but his declaration of not letting death part us is stronger than any poetic confession.

I smile.

Derik is a man of his word. If he says it, he means it.

“I’d pounce on you here and now if I weren’t broken,” I tease.

For a moment, he fails to conceal the surprise on his face, then quickly composes himself, but I can see his chest rising and falling rapidly.

I click my tongue.

“Too bad.”

“Stop. Your priority is to get better. Understand?”

Derik shoots me a warning look.

I roll my eyes and then pucker my lips.

“Kiss me,” I order.

“I don’t put moves on cripples.”

“Killjoy!”

He smiles and shakes his head, then pecks my mouth before settling back in his seat. Our playful banter continues until the doctor comes in for rounds. Derik attentively listens to his instructions, and I’m relieved to hear that I’ll be able to go home in a week if everything goes well.

When he leaves, Mrs. Lindt comes with a warm bowl of porridge, which Derik quickly takes from her. He insists on feeding me even though my hands are perfectly fine.

It feels good to be cared for by the man I love.

“Something’s bothering me,” I say after finishing the food. My bed is raised so that I’m slightly sitting up, making me a lot more comfortable.

“What?”

“My parents died in a car accident. Do you think it was just a coincidence that I got into one? I mean...” I trail off and fill my lungs with air as ideas come pouring in. “Mason has no motive to kill me. For sure, his goal was only to get rid of me as a rival in the company, right? Besides, my instincts are telling me that the time we spent together and the connection we had was genuine.”

Derik winces.

“What are you saying?”

“I mean, I feel like he really saw me as a friend. It was sincere. He wouldn’t kill me.”

He falls silent for a moment before grunting in response.

“We’ll know soon enough. Don’t think too much. You need to rest.”

“Derik...”

“Don’t worry. I’m here. I won’t let anyone hurt you.”

His voice is full of conviction. I trust him. The whole world could turn against me, and I’d still blindly follow him, believing and obeying every word he speaks, because I’ve come to realize over time that his top priority is always my well-being, even over his own.

For the last three years, he’s always done things in my best interest.

There is no one more dependable than my man.

Yes, my man.

CHAPTER 18

DERIK

“**Y**ou’re so sexy with your apron on.”
“What about without?” I tease, scratching the tip of my nose as I meet Natalie’s mischievous gaze and put the dishes down on the table.

Mrs. Whittle and Mrs. Lindt have taken a few days off after I convinced them to rest. The old women deserve it for having stayed and cared for Natalie these past months. I’ve taken on the task of cooking our meals for the time being.

She rolls her eyes, averting her gaze with her cheeks flushed. She settles on an empty chair and inhales the scent emitted by the cheesecake in the oven, looking like an eager little hamster.

“I never knew you could cook,” she comments, eyeing the steaming salmon.

It’s been a week since Natalie’s casts were removed. To my relief, she’s already able to walk on her own and her wounds have healed well. Her bone surgery was successful, and she’s undergoing physical therapy for a full recovery.

“I couldn’t. William bought me a few cookbooks.”

I cock a brow, then take a slice and place it on her plate with pride.

She frowns. With an apprehensive expression, she pokes the fish on her plate as if making sure it's not still alive. The look on her face is amusing, and I can't help pinching her cheek.

"It's not that bad. Try it."

She winces.

"Is this your first time cooking?"

I chuckle heartily. Her innocence never fails to tickle me.

"Do you think, I, Derik Lewis, have the time to cook every day?" I ask haughtily.

Raising her head, she meets my gaze with a scowl.

"Can't we just order food? I might get food poisoning at this rate. I don't want to go back to the hospital!"

Feeling my brows twitch, I sit on the chair next to hers, grab a fork and start eating. She knows how picky I am when it comes to food. If I can't convince her with my words, I know my actions will.

I can't blame her though.

It really is my first time cooking.

Following my lead, she tastes the dish, making a slurping sound with the soup. I've done my research and made sure to prepare foods that will help to heal her bones. And William, before flying back to San Francisco, showed me how to use the kitchen.

"Not bad," Natalie chirps.

Raising a brow, I watch her take a scoop of wild rice and fill her bowl with chicken broth. The dishes are simple, but it took a bit of trial and error until I was content with my results.

"Of course."

She swallows her food and licks her lips before letting out a giggle.

"Did you learn to cook for me?"

I pause and then shake my head. “No?”

“Geez. It wouldn’t hurt you to just admit it.”

I grin, rustling her hair on the top of her head.

“Food from restaurants is filled with preservatives and excess sugar. It’s not good for your health, especially while you’re still recuperating.”

Being in Natalie’s presence is a habit that’s turned into a necessity. Regardless of not speaking about it, it’s become a need every day to see her beautiful, innocent face and hear her sweet voice. Her intoxicating scent lingers in my senses, and it takes a lot of energy to restrain myself every time our skin touches. I want to hold and claim her.

I want her more than anything or anyone in this world.

But it’s wrong.

She’s like a sibling, a sister that I’m compelled to protect. Regardless of not sharing blood ties, we are family, raised and taught the same morals by the same man.

Family...

These thoughts continue to concern me. Our relationship has gotten a lot better, and I want to cherish every moment with her. Yet, deep inside, I know that I would not be able to give her the kind of future she’s dreamed of—a home full of love and happiness.

“What are you thinking? Your phone’s ringing...” Natalie speaks impatiently, snapping me back to reality. Her plate is almost empty, and the oven’s timer just made a loud *ding* sound.

Nodding, I get up from my seat.

The caller is my buddy, Ashton.

Frowning, I walk away from the dining room and head to my study. I don’t want Natalie to hear the conversation.

“*Bro!*”

“What do you want?” I ask impatiently.

Ashton chuckles before letting out a deep sigh.

“It seems like you don’t treat me like a brother anymore at all! I’ll be shocked to death the day I receive your wedding invitation.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

Massaging the bridge of my nose, I settle my the office chair, my gaze landing on a photograph. It’s a high school graduation photo of Natalie. She’s holding a bouquet of stargazers with Benedict’s hand on her shoulder, beaming proudly.

“I heard Natalie was in an accident.”

I feel the corner of my lips twitch. Did he call just to gossip?

“I’m hanging up.”

“You’re aware that Moore was not behind the car accident, right? Even still, Natalie’s parents also died in a car crash. It was just a coincidence that two vehicles were speeding up at the same time Natalie was rushing to arrive at the scene?”

“You and your conspiracies.”

“It’s not a conspiracy.”

I raise my brow. The familiar voice sounds unusually tired and irritated.

Another voice comes on the line. *“It may have slipped your attention, but the drivers of the vehicles completely disappeared after they were discharged from the hospital. It doesn’t end with Moore behind bars and Natalie securing her position. This was no accident.”*

The second speaker is Gray Goldstein, another brother from the frat.

I’m already aware of the things he speaks of. Unfortunately, my team and I reached a dead end when we tried to probe for further information about the missing people.

“Funny how you have the time to chatter about me when you just came back from a deadly mission. Who put you up to this?”

Gray laughs.

“I’m glad I made it back in time for your wedding!”

“Nonsense. There’s no wedding.” I mumble dismissively, reaching out for the picture frame.

“Bro. Have you ever wondered why old Quinn left that villa under your name? Natalie wasn’t even a minor when you took her under your wing! See that picture frame in your study taken during Natalie’s high school graduation?”

Ashton says.

Wincing, I look around, suspicious that there might be surveillance cameras in the room. Ashton’s familiar snickering pulls my attention back.

“Gray’s done a little digging on your woman.”

A little?

The word seems absurd, knowing that this brother of mine wouldn’t hesitate to leave a large crevice on the earth’s crust to find whatever information he needs.

Gray is a freak when it comes to sleuthing, making him one of the top agents of Interpol. He enjoys things that most people would run like hell from, like putting his life in danger in war zones and digging for evidence against some of the most dangerous people in the world. If I didn’t know him better, I’d consider him a lunatic.

My woman...

My mouth curls. That doesn’t sound so bad.

“Spit it out.”

The men laugh over the line and cut off the call. Frowning, I grip the phone while eyeing the frame again. With growing suspicion, I drop the gadget and examine the photo with my hands tinkering with the locks on the back. Removing the back cover, I find folded pieces of paper that have turned brown over the years.

I squint.

There are two pages. One filled with the familiar sophisticated cursive handwriting of my grandfather. And the other, with Benedict's.

I scan through the words, feeling conflicted over whether I should be happy or offended.

Natalie and I were betrothed all along.

Those old men and their tricks...to think that I've tortured myself countless nights, torn over our relationship! Jesus!

CHAPTER 19

NATALIE

One year and two months after the collapse incident, the business center finally rose, collectively gathering the interest of the citizens of Tucson. After putting Mason behind bars, the project carried on as planned, and those senior executives who showed me disdain retreated with their tails tucked. At one point, I thought those cunning old men were behind Mason's crimes, but I found out later that Arthur had shown his full support to me.

It's strange.

I hadn't expected I'd get his approval so soon.

"Earth to Natalie."

Kelsi's melodious voice passes my ear, jolting me in surprise. She eyes me playfully as she sips from her goblet. She looks beautiful in her black velvet halter dress that outlines her curves, exposing her healthy bosom and striking collarbones. Her dark brown hair is styled into a side bun adorned with tiny rhinestones that glimmer under the lights. If I were a man, I'd be falling all over her.

"What's with that stare?" she questions.

“I’d marry you if I could, you know that, right?” I say in between soft chuckles.

We’re at the handover banquet, and all the influential people in business and politics in Tucson are here to celebrate with us. Prospect investors and business partners of Quinn Industries and Lewis Corporation are present as well. In addition, Arthur hired a few celebrities to appear to stir publicity for the celebration.

“Apologies my friend, I am very straight.”

I click my tongue and fake a glare.

“Besides, it’s hard to compete with a man like yours. If you may excuse me,” Kelsi whispers as her eyes squint in one direction.

Pivoting, I see Derik approaching with William in tow. He looks especially attractive in his black tux with a dark grey vest that accentuates his gray eyes. His dark hair is styled into a textured brush-up, giving a strong authoritative vibe that complements his sharp features. His jaw is clenched as he scans me from head to toe then back up, sending chills of anticipation down my spine.

I bite my lips, feeling as though my heart is stuck in my throat.

When our eyes lock, I break into a smile, seeing the longing in his.

“You’re here!” I chirp when he stops to stand next to me.

“Of course. I wouldn’t miss this for anything,” he breathes, his hands slithering around my waist. His magnetic voice is low and hoarse. “Not when you’re dressed like this.” He raises his brow.

Feeling scorched by his touch, I nonchalantly sip champagne from my goblet to feign calmness.

“I’m glad you made it in time,” I mumble impassively.

He just arrived from a business trip in New York.

Derik chuckles, pulling me closer to his side.

I shiver, feeling pathetic for still getting chills from him like the first time we touched. We've been intimate for quite some time now, but instead of fading, my emotions and responses have only grown stronger.

"You look beautiful in that dress, hmm?" he murmurs, lowering his head so that his lips graze the tip of my ear. His voice is gentle and almost sounds like a moan, giving me goosebumps.

"T-thanks."

I look away with my cheeks burning. I'm wearing a beige, lacey, long-sleeved, body-hugging, mermaid-cut, turtle-neck dress. The front is considerably conservative, fully covering my chest. But from behind, my back is heavily exposed with the large, inverted triangle cut, making my bare skin easily accessible to his touch.

It's a dress he picked out for me.

Blinking frantically, I shoot Derik a warning glare when I feel his fingers tracing the arch of my back, sending tingles throughout my body. I purse my lips against the excitement flooding through me.

Oh, how I missed his touch.

"Let's get out of here."

Quickly, Derik takes a glass of champagne from the waiter passing by. He grabs a spoon from the high table and taps it a few times against the goblet, gathering the attention of the crowd. As if on cue, the loud music stops, and the invited media personnel aim their cameras in our direction.

Derik squeezes my waist reassuringly, my grip on my glass tightening when cameras start flashing one after another. Taking his usual stern expression, he sweeps the crowd with a serious glance.

"I'd like to make a toast to Natalie for the success of this project. She's consistently displayed exemplary competency and professionalism, always exceeding requirements and expectations. She's proven extraordinary leadership

abilities, commitment, reliability, and foresight. It is my honor to announce that, from this day forward, Natalie Quinn, heir of Benedict Quinn, will be leading Quinn Industries.”

Wide-eyed, I glance at Derik in surprise. I hadn’t been expecting him to step down so soon! Besides, I don’t think I have enough experience to handle the company. Not yet!

“Does that mean Ms. Quinn will be sitting as the CEO?”

“Did the senior members of the company agree to this?”

“Does this mean you are relinquishing your control over Quinn Industries, Mr. Lewis?”

Through the bombing of questions, I feel Derik’s hand holding mine, and he slowly leads it closer to his mouth. Agape, his lips brush the back of my hand, searing a sense of security and prickling warmth throughout my being. My senses are in overdrive as the noise of the commotion coming from the reporters and the flashing lights are drowned out by the loud beating of my heart. I open my mouth to say something, but the words are left hanging at the tip of my tongue when he pulls me in and plants a kiss on my forehead.

I swallow, then close my eyes, unable to comprehend what is going on or what he’s thinking. All I know is that I feel safe with him.

“You trust me, right?” he asks, tilting my chin so that our eyes lock.

I open my eyes and meet his gaze. There’s an intense eagerness in his gray orbs, as if he will break if I don’t say yes. His expression is one of pleading, but the smile on his lips emits confidence.

I hum in affirmation.

It is not forced.

Because I do.

I really do trust him.

With my mind, body, and soul.

“Where Quinn goes, Lewis follows,” Derik affirms meaningfully before raising his glass. “To Natalie!” he exclaims with pride.

“To Natalie!”

Scanning the crowd, I watch the senior members of the board as they clap their hands and smile. Kelsi, standing next to her father, follows suit until the hall is filled with loud applause. Influential people come one after another to congratulate me. And all throughout, Derik’s hand is glued around my waist, as if he’s scared someone might take me away. On the other hand, it serves as a deterrent to the men who express their admiration and lecherous thoughts with their stares. It takes an hour and a half before Derik can excuse us and leads me out to the garden courtyard of the hotel.

He looks extremely pissed.

“What’s wrong?” I ask curiously.

We are at a dimly lit pavilion away from the crowded ballroom. The scent of the flowers on the evening breeze is refreshing, calming my nerves. The event unfolded like a storm and, as much as I tried to keep my composure, I still felt flustered at the announcement.

“Nothing.” His voice is low and breathy.

I watch him lean his back against the railing, his features softened under the dull illumination of the fairy lights. The moonlight shines on his handsome face, making him look like a god that descended from the heavens.

He is breathtaking.

Crossing my arms on my chest, I study the frown on his face.

I smirk playfully.

“I was wrong about you,” I mutter softly, inching closer to him. I press my body against his. With the help of my high heels, I look up and open my mouth enough to graze his jawline. Then, I breathe heavily against his neck.

He grunts as he wraps a hand around my waist, the other squeezing my butt.

“About what?” he asks huskily.

“I take back what I said. You are quite romantic.”

“Hmmm?”

I tug the bowtie on his collar, pulling his face closer to my reach. Sluggishly, I trace his lips with a finger and then nibble his chin. Feeling his muscles tense, I bite his lower lip teasingly as he slips his hand beneath the edge of the triangular cut in the back of my dress.

“Where Quin goes, Lewis follows, hmm?” I breathe against his mouth, mimicking him.

“What about it?”

With a swift move, he twirls me around and pushes me a few steps to the side so that my back rests against a large, round column. His free hand slips under the slit of my dress, his fingers wandering up and down the length of my thigh.

Challenged, I squint my eyes and raise and crook my leg to pull him closer. I wrap a hand around his neck and sear his mouth with a provocative kiss. I squirm against his body, deliberately rubbing my belly against the bulge in his pants.

When he groans in anticipation, I push him a little.

“What a sophisticated way to declare ownership!” he snorts.

“I don’t remember signing any kind of deed, though.”

Derik cocks a brow and shoots me a warning glance, his hand sliding between my legs. He smirks coyly, making heat shoot up my cheeks.

“Naughty,” he remarks, softly biting the tip of my ear. His fingers gently caress my sensitive folds.

“T-the fabric is so delicate. It wouldn’t look right if I had something on...” I explain.

“Is it?” he teases.

I hum, linking my arms tightly around his neck, rubbing my chest against his while my hips rotate in anticipation, creating friction against his long and slender fingers.

“It wasn’t a mistake picking this dress, huh?”

I whimper in anticipation.

But Derik abruptly gathers back his hands as if he’s suddenly scared of getting burned. I scowl at him while his mouth curls into a sexy grin. Before I can spit another word, he grasps my hand and leads the way across the garden, heading straight to the exit, ditching the party. His strides are long and quick, and I scamper to keep up. I’m panting lightly when I find myself tucked behind the seatbelt in the familiar passenger seat of his Maybach.

Derik shoots me a lustful gaze before letting the engine roar as he speeds back to the villa. It takes a while for my pulse to relax as my eyes relish the lovely nightscape. When the car pulls into the driveway, I quickly get out and strut inside the house, surprised by the quiet.

It’s almost midnight.

Of course, Mrs. Whittle and Mrs. Lindt have gone to bed.

“Were you expecting someone to save you?”

Derik’s husky voice thunders across the open living room. Rotating, I find his towering figure leaning against the newel at the foot of the staircase. Speechless, I roll my eyes and climb the steps nervously while making a mental note not to tease and provoke him ever again.

Before my thoughts can settle down, Derik scoops me in a swoop and carries me with a single arm. Hungrily, he sears my mouth with a penetrating kiss as he marches across the halls. With his tongue dancing in rhythm with mine, I feel my stomach twisting into a knot, making it harder to breathe. His scent fills my senses, overwhelming me with euphoria.

“God, I missed you!” I whisper against his mouth when he breaks away to give me space.

He responds with a grin.

Encouraged, I nibble his jaw and then softly bite the exposed length of his neck, earning a loud groan of satisfaction. I hear a door behind me make a creaking sound as his free hand removes the hook that holds my dress in place. Swiftly, he presses me against the wall with the cloth falling to the floor, revealing my naked body.

“That was easy,” he mumbles, kissing the tip of my nose with an eyebrow raised.

My cheeks heat up. His burning gaze makes me shiver like a cornered bunny as his eyes feast on my body. The longer he looks, the hotter I feel.

It’s insane.

“Feeling shy?”

I choke and shake my head. Embarrassed, I pivot only to realize that we are inside my room. It’s dark, but the moonlight emanating through space from the French doors creates a mysterious atmosphere, the white curtains swaying in the evening breeze.

Derik spins me around and lightly pushes me to the edge of the bed. Unceremoniously, he strips off his clothes as he stands a foot away from me. My eyes focus on his flexing muscles as I gulp like a thirsty badger, analyzing and admiring every part of his lean body. With a soft thud from his belt, his arousal is exposed.

He is so big!

This isn’t the first time we’ve seen each other nude, but I still can’t get used to it. Though hot, I shiver at his touch as he grasps my arm and leads it to his well-defined six-pack, encouraging me to touch him.

“Touch me,” he orders.

I meet his gaze, his eyes burning with passion and lust as he watches me expectantly, his Adam's apple bobbing in his throat. If it wasn't for his assertive tone, I'd take it as begging. He pants as my fingers move around, tracing every inch and corner of his sculpted body. Then, I wrap my palm firmly around his arousal, making him grunt.

"Like this?" I tease.

Cautiously, I plant a soft kiss on the tip of his cock as I cup his balls with my free hand. When he groans, I feel extremely pleased. Then I get up and gather my strength; placing my hands on his shoulders, I spin him around so that my whole weight rests on his large body. When we land on the bed with him under me, I'm satisfied.

"You've been learning quite a lot of new tricks, Ms. Quinn," he comments hoarsely.

I giggle.

"Anything to please you, Mr. Lewis."

I devour his mouth passionately as my hands caress his arms, my hips gyrating and rubbing my wetness against his arousal. Panting heavily, my lips trail against his neck. I suck his nipples and mischievously nibble. Derik lets out another groan when I wrap my hands around his cock, peppering kisses against his hard pecks. Slowly, I move to lick the tip of his member like a lollipop. I tease his length with my tongue, making swirling movements when I reach the rounded head. His masculine scent drowns my senses, waking my carnal desires, my pussy growing wetter.

Derik grabs my ass with his hands and nimbly shifts us so that I'm under him. His magnetic gray eyes seem to suck my soul dry as he stares deeply into me. I gulp hard when he parts my legs to make room for himself. But to my surprise, he lowers his head and starts licking my mouth, neck, abdomen... and my wetness.

“Oohh!” I shriek when his tongue traces the length of my center. My cheeks are hot, realizing that he’s tasting my honey. I feel inhibited, but the pleasure makes me arch my back, my fingers combing through his hair.

“Ahh...that feels so good,” I moan impatiently, my rationality leaving me as carnal desire takes control. I pull his head closer when he slips his tongue inside and makes swirling motions.

Derik abandons my throbbing lady parts, kissing upward along my body. When he reaches my neck he plunges in, filling me with his length, leaving me breathless as he slides in and out. My muscles tighten around him as he moves, slowly at first. When he picks up pace, cries of pleasure methodically escape my mouth.

“Yes! Oh, shit!” I exclaim as beads of sweat trickle down my chest. Encouraged, Derik cups my breasts with his hands and sucks them like a baby in need of milk. He pounds into me hard and fast, working me to the brink of insanity.

“You like that, hmm?” he asks breathlessly.

Not waiting for a response, he rocks, rotating his hips, and pushes his dick deeper and harder, reaching nerves that send me shuddering violently in pleasure. His movements are demanding. Instinctively, my hips move in rhythm with his, sending me to the edge of bliss.

My walls quiver around him.

“Oh, yes...” I whimper, nearing my orgasm.

The slapping sound of skin and the smell of carnal lust and sweat are driving me insane, like an addictive drug. Derik’s mouth nestles and nibbles the crook of my neck as his thrusts grow heavier. I lock my legs around his waist for support, my back arched to meet the strokes of his cock inside me.

He grunts as I moan, and we finally come.

He seals my mouth with a deep kiss one more time before collapsing his weight onto the space next to me, panting heavily. His expression is soft as he pulls me into his arms, pushing my damp and disheveled hair from my forehead. Derik holds me in his embrace for a few minutes until our breathing relaxes and my eyes grow heavy.

“Take a shower. I’ll change your sheets,” he whispers softly.

His soft kisses snap me awake.

Nodding obediently, I get up and sluggishly meander across the room, but my attention refocuses when I step on a bulging object. I look down to find it underneath the man’s coat that fell on the floor when he was getting undressed. I pick it up suspiciously and find a black velvet box inside the pocket.

My heart skips a beat when I crack it open, exposing a ring. It is a well-crafted round pink diamond that’s seated between two smaller princess-cut clear ones on a platinum band that looks antique.

There is an engraved initial under it, too!

Without a doubt, this is an heirloom.

“Derik...” I call out. The man is cluelessly opening cabinets searching for extra sheets. “Were you planning to propose at the banquet tonight?”

I watch his back freeze in the middle of closing the drawers at the bottom of my wardrobe. Stifling a laugh, I click my tongue and stomp on the carpeted floor.

“Oh my! That would have been such a sight to see! Mr. Lewis, down on one knee!”

He turns around, wearing his signature stern look, illuminated by the dim wall sconces.

“Shut up.”

He scratches the back of his head awkwardly as he avoids my gaze.

I cackle, finding his expression quite cute. I wiggle my brows, stepping closer to him. Then, I point my finger at his bare chest and look into his eyes intently.

“It’s alright. I’ll give you the right to own me for life,” I tease.

Pivoting, he cocks a brow and snatches the ring from my hands. Swiftly, he slips it onto my ring finger, sending a flood of emotions through me. I’m shocked and excited at the same time. All this time, I never doubted his feelings for me. But from time to time, I’ve questioned where it might take us in the future...if such a thing could exist for us.

He snorts.

“Not enough.”

I wince and stick out my lower lip.

“How demanding.”

“More.”

“Now and forever?”

“More.”

This time, I throw up a scowl, feeling annoyed. Why does nothing seem to be enough for this man?!

“Aren’t you supposed to be the one giving the talk, here?”

He sighs and his expression softens as his mouth curls into a grin. His gray eyes glimmer with amusement as he pinches the tip of my nose. Then, he holds my shoulders, gazing at me admiringly. The affection in his eyes is blatantly evident.

He kisses my forehead, easing my crumpled face.

“I swear to protect you...” he whispers.

“To cherish you...”

His mouth grazes my nose.

“And to love you with all of my heart.”

He kisses each of my cheeks.

“Body and soul... for all eternity.”

His words are simple, but like a song to my ears, calming the storm brewing in my heart. My eyes well with tears when his mouth finally lands on mine. My vision is blurry as I respond to his tender gesture. I have never felt this happy in my whole life!

“Marry me, Natalie Quinn,” he mumbles hoarsely against my lips.

I giggle.

“Is that an order?”

He shakes his head, and then smirks playfully.

“Nope. But you can’t say no either. This engagement is long overdue. After all, our grandfathers arranged it while you were still an infant, hmm?”

“You’re joking,” I shriek, pulling away.

Mouth agape, I look at him in disbelief with my palms against my cheeks. Blinking frantically, I watch him burst into laughter, his muscles relaxed and his face jubilant.

“You heard that right. I’m just claiming my bride.”

“Seriously?”

He hums, pulling me back into his arms.

“In that case, take me away by all means, mister!”

Chuckling, I nestle into his chest and listen to the rhythmic sound of his heartbeat, proving this is real. My heart swells with happiness and fulfillment, and a tear escapes my eyes, unable to contain my joy.

All along, we were destined to be together.

But regardless of the arranged marriage, deep inside, I have always known I’d end up with him. It might have taken some time, but the end game always would have been the same.

He was worth the wait.

THE END

Did you like reading Billionaire Boss Protector?

Then you'll LOVE My Best Friend's Bossy Brother!

It's a book about how sometimes the worst things that happen to us turn out to be the best things... even when they come in the form of the smokin' hot cocky billionaire playboy you've hated since high school, who happens to be your best friend's brother. And your new boss.

SNEAK PEEK—Chapter One

Some say every cloud has a silver lining.

Those people haven't had to beg their cocky, playboy, best friend's brother for a job.

Liam Hills has been on my most hated list since high school.

His arrogant attitude and stupid chiseled jaw make me want to throw punches.

I'll never forgive him for what he did to me back then.

Tough luck though.

I lost everything and now my only option is taking a position as his assistant.

...I wind up taking a few other positions for him as well.

Now we're hooked on each other.

Every wall we'd built against love has imploded.

Until his ex shows up revealing a horrifying secret.

I block him. No questions asked.

Weeks later I receive a mysterious message that changes it all.

I still can't see a silver lining...

But losing everything might turn out to be the greatest thing that's ever happened to me.

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Giana

The hot afternoon air whipped around my blonde hair as I stared out of the window mindlessly. The coffee shops, massage parlors, boutiques, fast food joints, and people out on their lunch breaks zoomed past in a blur as tears formed behind my eyes. I slid my hand from under the box on my lap and wiped away a stream of salty liquid that had found its way down my cheek and into my slightly parted mouth.

I'd heard people talk about their hatred for Mondays, but that was never me. Monday had always been the best day of the week for me. It was a time of renewal. That day of the week when you started fresh. You were rejuvenated by the long rest of the two-day weekend and ready to go in again. But now, I wasn't so sure anymore. I wasn't so sure of anything anymore. Monday was beginning to look like the evil day a lot of people made it out to be.

Why?

I arrived at work this morning in the best mood ever, looking chic in my newly purchased green sleeveless dress that was cinched at the waist and flared gracefully through the skirt.

"Looking snatched, girl!" a colleague called from her table as I made my way in.

I twirled around to give her a 360-degree view of my outfit.

"Snatched!" the colleague repeated, snapping her fingers in the air.

I laughed out loud. "Thank you. It's new. I got it at a shop downtown on sale for fifty bucks."

"What? That's a steal," my colleague let out.

"I know," I replied in a sing-song voice, making my way to my desk.

"I need their deets, ASAP."

"I got you, girl. I'll give you the address," I assured her, and she nodded.

It was almost lunchtime, and I was getting ready to head out when Lana, my boss, stepped out of her office and summoned me.

I stuffed my files into the top drawer and made my way to her office, knocking gently on the white wood door.

"Come in," her raspy voice called from within. She looked up from the book before her, pushed her glasses down her nose, made hard eye contact with me, and motioned for me to take the seat across from her.

I sat on the edge of it, my mind racing through every plausible reason why my boss would want me in her office.

She turned her attention to the book on her table again, thumbing through it with a stern look on her face. After what seemed like forever, she raised her head from the book, delicately removed her glasses, and clasped her hands on the slick white table.

She cleared her throat. "Giana Brookes."

Okay, she never called me by my full name. Now I knew something was wrong. Had a client reported me or something? I didn't think so. I'd always treated our clients well.

But before I could wonder further, Lana's voice cut into my thoughts. "You've been instrumental to the growth of this company, and I really appreciate that, but I'm afraid we're letting you go."

Letting me go where?

Then it dawned on me. My heart started to race so fast I thought it might give out. Beads of sweat formed at the base of my neck and ran down my back.

I dug my fingers into the edge of the table and leaned forward. "What?" I asked in disbelief. "If I've been instrumental to the company's growth, then why

am I being let go?"

Lana ignored my question. "We wish you the best as you move on, Gia," she said, picking up her glasses and perching them on her nose again.

A plethora of feelings coursed through me in the space of mere seconds. I couldn't scream, shout, or laugh. I couldn't process what was happening. I was numb.

And now here I was, in a cab on a Monday afternoon with my personal items in a box on my lap. Watching people bustle around the city, meeting friends and colleagues as though it were any other day. People who'd go back to work after having a filling lunch. Something I was missing out on.

I shifted the box that was beginning to slide off my lap and took in a deep breath.

Yep, I, Giana Brookes, was now officially a hater of Mondays, courtesy of my now ex-boss, Lana. Lana had never really liked me since she took over for my former boss, but the fire got stoked at an office party about four months ago when her husband complimented me. She'd had it in for me since then. The funny thing was, I wasn't the least bit attracted to her husband, nor was I the type of woman to entertain a married man.

The cab came to a stop in front of my apartment building. I swept away a few tears that had fallen down my cheek again, this time dragging with them smears of my mascara. I paid the driver and heaved myself out of the car. Propping the box against my hip I slogged up the stairs to the second floor. As I climbed the stairs and my door came into view, I could see a pink slip of paper stuck to my door. It had not been there when I left the house this morning. When I got to the top of the stairs, I laid the box on the floor, careful not to upset or break the picture in it of my mom and me that was taken eight years ago. I snatched the slip off my door and glanced over it. I already knew what it was. My rent had been due for a few weeks now.

I threw the slip into the box, then pulled my purse out of it and fished out my key. I jiggled my door open, pulled the box closer with my left foot, and crouched to pick it up. Somehow it felt like I was carrying my life's problems in my hands. The box was as heavy as my heart was.

As soon as I made it in, I plopped the box on the table with a little less care and flicked on the light switch. I moved to the window to pull open my light blue linen curtains. I lingered a little, staring out of the window. Then I moved to the other side of the room, behind my soft blue sofa, to pull apart the other set of curtains. As the curtains moved further apart, I imagined it like my life splitting in two. I stood, taking in my living room. When I got this apartment, I'd been so excited. It was a place I could call my own. It wasn't much, but it was enough for me. I bought soft blue sofas from a furniture store and bought a lot of vintage stuff, a filtered lamp that cast glows of yellow at nighttime, two white high stools that I put at the kitchen counter, a rectangular coffee table, and an Arabian rug placed in the middle of the room underneath it. I'd done quite a nice job. I looked around and let out a sigh, then walked into my bedroom.

I still felt like I was in a daze. I felt like I was dreaming. Was I really back on the job market? Or would I wake up from this bad dream soon? I came to a stop before my full-length mirror. No, it wasn't a dream. The image of myself in my beautiful green dress, my blonde hair splayed across my face, which was smudged with black eye makeup, was real as real could be.

I lowered myself onto the low stool in front of my dresser, and as my butt landed on it, a flood of tears found their way out. My head fell on the dresser, my neck unable to bear the weight as my body convulsed as I wept. After a few minutes of uncontrollable sobbing, my breathing slowly came back to normal, and I raised my head. I thought I looked crazy when I first caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror. I looked crazier now. My hair was plastered on my

forehead, covering one eye, and my eyeliner had joined my mascara in coloring my face black.

I pulled aside the hair obstructing half of my vision and put my fingers to the not-so-visible scar on my forehead that had begun to itch. I scratched at it lightly and stood up to pull off my dress. I left it lying on the floor as I made my way to the bathroom. I filled the bathtub with cool water, unhooked my bra, slipped out of my silk panties, and plunked into the water. It did well to soothe my body a little. As the water cooled and soothed my muscles, I shifted to the edge and laid my head on it.

When I came to this city after college, I thought things would play out differently. I studied psychology at Brown University, and I was excited to start my own practice, but I had to work first to save money. It had been five years, and I was still working with barely any savings. Manhattan was not a cheap city to live in, but it was my lifelong dream.

And what was worse? I was jobless now.

I lowered my head until the water covered my face, opened my eyes, and let out a scream. A muffled scream. A silent scream. My neighbors couldn't hear me because the water had cut out any sound. That was exactly how I felt right now. I felt like the universe, or something out there, was against me. I was screaming for help, with no one to come to my rescue because no one could hear me. When I was beginning to feel woozy, I raised my head out of the water and wiped my face with my hand.

I didn't have lunch; neither did I have dinner. I sat on my sofa with my knees drawn up to my chin, my feet covered with a fluffy blanket, my left hand holding it in place and my phone in my right hand. I needed to talk to someone. Not just anyone, but Zoey, my friend back home I'd been close with since we were teenagers.

I needed to get my thoughts out or I'd go crazy.

“Gia! I was just thinking of calling you when I got home. Had too much work to do today. Just finishing up. Cakes are delicious, but boy are they difficult to make.”

When I didn’t say anything, she asked. “Gia, are you okay?”

I sighed hard. “I’m not. I got fired today,” I said in an unsteady and resigned voice.

“Oh my God, that bitch!”

Zoey had been my rant absorber; she knew all that Lana had put me through.

“She finally got rid of me. She did.”

“I’m so sorry to hear that. Did anything else happen?”

“No, I didn’t do anything wrong. She called me into her office this afternoon and gave me the sack.”

“Gosh,” she said, and I could hear her sit on something, the sound of a chair against a marble floor.

“I only have a couple hundred dollars in my account. And the shittiest thing is rent is past due. I don’t know where to start. It’d be easier to find a needle in a haystack than to find a well-paying job in New York right now,” I said, wrapping my fingers around the blanket on my feet.

“They should give you severance, at least.”

“Nope, no severance, no benefits, no nothing. I was tossed out like an over-sucked orange.”

“You should sue her.”

“Where do I get the money to hire a lawyer? I’d rather use any money I can get now to pay my bills.”

“I could help you with some money,” Zoey said, almost quietly, because she knew how much I didn’t like to depend on people, least of all her.

“You know I can’t do that. I’m sure I’ll get a job if I search hard enough. There has to be a travel agency hiring and, with my experience, it shouldn’t be too far

out of reach," I said, even though I didn't believe my own words.

Zoey exhaled, but she didn't mention giving me money again because she knew I'd refuse.

"Why don't you come back home? I mean, if you look for a job and can't find one, you can always come back."

I stretched my legs out, the blanket falling to the floor. "Back to Providence? What would I be coming back to? Why?"

"Why not?" Zoey asked rhetorically. "You could start over here, and when you make enough, you can go back to New York. It's easier out here. Well, things are getting awfully expensive now, but I know it's not as bad as a city like Manhattan."

"You know there's nothing in Rhode Island for me. I'm still going to be homeless over there, and you know that. You know our house was foreclosed after Mom died and I couldn't pay the mortgage."

"I am highly offended, Giana," Zoey said.

I sat up. "What? What did I do?"

"How could you say such a thing when I have a house here that you can stay at?"

"I'm so sorry. You know I don't like to impose."

"I know, but you also know I'd never watch you go without. Why are you so stubborn about doing everything on your own? I'm your friend. What are friends for if we can't help each other?"

I swallowed and bent to pick up the blanket from the floor. "But you never need help from me. I'm always the one needing help."

"Well, I'm not complaining, am I? My door is always open to you. Providence is a good place to stay until things go back to normal. You could get a job here and save some money."

"I'm not so sure, Zoey. There's nothing waiting for me there. I grew up there just aching to get out. I can't go back."

"Just give it a thought, and I pray you find a job soon. If you don't, then you're welcome here. I have to pack up now. My assistants left an hour ago, so I have to pack up alone. I'll call you before going to bed, okay?"

I nodded my head as if she could see me. "Okay."

She blew me a kiss into the phone and hung up.

I stared down at the screen light until it went dark and then stood up and made for the window. I was drawn by the light filtering into my apartment through the half-open curtains. If I'd been told that I'd be considering the prospects of moving back home, I would have laughed. When my mom died, it was like the only thing pulling me back had snapped in two, severing all ties. Zoey was there, but I just never had the urge to go back; Zoey and I talked regularly on the phone, which was enough. It'd been years since I went back, and going back under these circumstances would be humiliating.

I sat on the windowsill and stared down at the flashes of light from the cabs and shops that were teeming with people. If you wanted to achieve anything, and I mean anything at all, New York was the place. People came from far and wide to achieve their dreams here. I had failed woefully. If I couldn't make it in New York, a place where I was supposed to be spoiled with choices and opportunities, how was I going to achieve anything in Providence? It was hilarious that Zoey had even suggested it. What was I going to do there?

But the more I thought about it, the more I accepted that it might end up being my only option. If I couldn't find a job in the next three weeks, I was toast, and Providence, Rhode Island would be my next destination.

I shook my head. No, I had to find a well-paying job here. Providence was nothing but a dead end. There was nothing there for me.

Absolutely nothing.

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