

In Love With My Evil Stepbrother Chapter 71

Midnight Date I've imagined a million times what it would be like when we meet again. Maybe at our family gathering, maybe at a friend's party, or maybe even at my wedding in the future.

But I've never thought about this, with him sitting there with his beautiful new girlfriend, and me standing there all embarrassed like a clown

This can't be any NOTIC

But unlike me, he doesn't seem surprised at all. He simply looks at me calmly, as if we just saw each other this morning

"Babe," his girlfriend pouts. "This is the stupid waitress I was talking about. She ruined the outfit you got me and –"

He cuts her off, "Natalia."

He isn't pretending that he doesn't know me, as I thought he would be.

But he used to call me "Nat" and not "Natalia."

Then he stands up from his seat and leans forward, giving me a gentle hug. I can smell his scent, the familiar scent of mint and woods, but this hug feels very strange. His hug used to be full of passion and energy, but now it's polite and aloof.

"It's been a long time," he rises up and smiles at me. "How have you been?"

How have I been?

I have been terrible. For the first year we parted, I would think of him every single day and would relive all those happy and heartbreaking memories again and again. Every day was like hell. And then when I finally managed to move on, I have lost the ability to love again,

I thought it would be hard for him too.

But now he proves me wrong. He seems perfectly fine with seeing me again, as if he has already forgotten all our past. And that makes me feel like a fool trying to avoid him all these times. I don't know how to react. So I can reply lowly, "...fine, I guess."

His girlfriend seems even more surprised than I am, "Wait Eason, do you know her?"

But Eaton simply ignores her and keeps staring at me, "You've lost some weight. I heard that you are studying at NYU now, then why are you working here?"

Really? Chut chat?

I can't do this with him

"...I have to make a living Non all of us wis born with a silver sin." I once out a smile. "Now please excuse me Miss, here's the blanket you asked for."

I shove her the blanket and turn around to leave I can feel his gaze following me behind my back, but I don't dare to look back

I flee all the way back to the changing room and find a quiet corner to calm down. My heart is thumping so wildly in my chest that I think I'm going to throw up the next second.

I really wasn't prepared for this. First my landlord showed up hunting me for rent, then I missed my bus and was late for work, and I ran into him with his new girlfriend, Bad things just keep coining at me like a rolling snowball. I let out a frustrated low groan. God, I don't want to go back out there and face them.

Suddenly, the door to the changing room flies open and another waitress walks inside. She seems surprised seeing me crouching down at the corner, "Natalia? What are you doing here?" "Nothing. Just taking a short break," I reply dryly. "OK...but don't let Lori find you. She is a total nutcase today."

I hesitates for a while and ask her, "Hey can I switch table with you? Just for this one time and I'll cover your shift later if you need me to."

She gives me a look of disbelief, "You want me to take over the table that you messed up?"

Not going to happen then.

"... Never mind," I smile bitterly. "Guess I'll have to face it myself."

After putting myself together, I go back waitressing. I put on my poker face and bring up their food, introduce their dishes and make my exit as quickly as possible. Eaton sits there quietly the entire time, though I can feel his girlfriend's hostile gaze clasing me like a dagger.

When I appear again to serve their main course, his girlfriend finally can't help it and breaks the silence, "you are Natalia, aren't you?"

I nod, “Yes iniss. So here we have your main course, a Dry-aged Muscovy Duck coupled with

“So he said you were his stepsister?” she cuts me off, defiantly. “How come I never met you before?”

My jaw tenses. She won’t let me have my peace.

So I straighten up and look down at her before saying, “I AM his stepbrother, present tense. My mom is still married to his father.” 1

A hint of anger appears in her almond-shaped eyes. I quickly carry on before she loses it, “And how long have you been dating again? I don’t know you, so I assume this is a recent thing?”

She hits the table hard with her hand and snaps, “Is this how you treat your customer? First ruined my dress and then talk back to me?!”

“My apology, Miss. I thought you were talking to me as my stepbrother’s girlfriend. Well, if you are only a customer, I won’t disturb you any further. Please enjoy your dinner.”

I’m pretty proud of myself about this specch, which clearly pissed her off bigtime. She tightens her grip on the knife as if she wants to stab me in the heart. Then she snaps her head around to Eason and grits out, “Babe. Aren’t you going to say something?” I hold my breath involuntarily. Is he going to scold me for offending his girlfriend? Feeling nervous, I take a quick peek at him and find him staring at me intently, his green eyes gleaming under the lights beautifully. He doesn’t seem mad.

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Then I hear him ask me, "Have you had dinner yet Natalia?" I'm stunned. Then I quickly bite down my lip to stifle a laugh. He ignored his girlfriend, again.

I know it's really disrespectful, but I still can't help but feel a triumph feeling fill up my heart. From a peripheral look, I can see his girlfriend widen her eyes in shock.

"Not yet," I say.

"When are you getting off from work?" he asks slowly, as if every word he says weighs a ton. "Maybe...I can take you out for dinner?"

And that is my wake-up call.

God, what am I doing? This is Eason! The person who played me like a fucking toy and broke my heart. He has already walked out of my life and is currently sitting here with his hot girlfriend. What makes him think that he can ask me out for dinner? He doesn't have the right, not even as my stepbrother.

The smile on my face faints away.

"You ARE having your dinner sir." I remind him coldly, "And I get off at midnight so you shouldn't wait up."

Then I give a quick nod at them before turning away. I don't know what Eason is trying to do, and I won't bother myself trying to find out.

The rest of the evening flies by. I got busy elsewhere and when I finally returned to Eason's table, they had already left.

"Generous tipper," the waitress who helped me collect their bill gives me a jealous glance.

I open the bill and find that he tipped almost 50%. Did he forget how to do math in these three years? "What did you do? Flirt with him a little?" the waitress asks me. "Don't be stupid. His girlfriend was right there." I sigh and murmurs, "...Though honestly, I don't understand myself."

He just left without a word of goodbye, not that I want to talk to him again though. I just find this very unlike him.

The old him would make some nasty jokes about how much I have changed and keep pestering me till I lose my temper. But now, he simply left a generous tip and walked away. I don't know how I should feel about that.

Maybe he really is treating me like his stepsister now. I take a deep breath and try to ignore the complex feeling in my heart. He is doing the right thing, keeping distance with me, and I shouldn't feel sad about this anymore.

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When my shift ends, Lori calls me into her office. "You messed up big time today." She squints at me with those little black eyes, "They

customer filled a complaint before she left. Do you have anything left to say?"

I swallow hard and try to sound as sincere as possible, "Lori I'm sorry. I'll work harder and take on more shifts to make it up. I was not feeling well today because my landlord"

"Stop!" she balls her fist and snorts. "I know you girls' tricks. It's always something, your horrible landlord, your abusive boyfriend, sick siblings? 'Those lame excuses ain't working for me. You are fired."

"What?!" I cry out

I can't believe this. One mistake, and she is going to fire me?! "But you can't! I was a loyal employee and I worked so hard"

"You worked so hard till today! Do you know the lady asked the restaurant to pay for her ruined dress? Do you know how much that costs? I can't afford to have another mistake like this from you in the future. You should feel relieved that I'm only firing you and not asking you to pay for the damage. Now get out of my office. GO!!" I bite my lips as hot tears fill my eyes. I know I should drop all my attitude and beg her with my life, but my pride gets in the way. Before she scolds at me again, I turn around and leave her office.

When I walk out of the restaurant, it's already midnight. And it starts to rain. The rainy night in New York is freezing cold and the worst thing is I don't have my umbrella with me.

I slowly crouch down under the roof, watching the raindrop dripping down in front me, as a strong wave of tiresome and exhaustion washes through me.

Today I got fired from the restaurant and have no money to pay for my rent. I don't even want to go back to my apartment – the landlord might still be there waiting for me.

How can people's lives be this different? I walked away from my painful breakup with nothing but pain and scars, and I'm still alone and broke now. But Eason seems perfectly well...he even got hotter over these years. It's not fair.

I'm still caught up in my moment of sadness when suddenly I hear footstep approaching me. Looking up, I find a man walking through the rain with an umbrella in his hand. He

comes to me and puts his umbrella above my head to shelter me from the rain. I am so shocked at the moment that I am not even sure if this is a dream.

“Just got off from work?” he asks.

I blink hard a few times and blurt out, “What are you doing here?”

I thought he left with his girlfriend a long time ago.

He crouches down in front of me till our eyes are about the same level, while still holding the umbrella for me. A faint but gentle smile appears on his lips as he says, “you said midnight. I can wait till midnight.”

In Love With My Evil Stepbrother Chapter 72

Read In Love With My Evil Stepbrother Chapter 72 – Whatever It Takes

I crouch down there frozen, staring at him.

“I said midnight. And you just waited me till midnight?” my voice is filled with shock.

“Yes,” he nods.

“But why?” I ask, perplexed.

I can't think of one reason that would make him wait in the weather like this for 2-3 hours.

Is he just trying to be nice? Or does he still have feelings for-no, impossible. I immediately laugh at that fleeting thought.

And then I hear his answer, “I said I want to have dinner with you. You clearly haven't eaten anything. Come, let's go.”

He rises and gestures me to follow. Before I realize, I'm already walking with him side by side under his umbrella. The chilly wind hits me, and I shiver. The next second, a scarf that still carries his warmth lands on my neck.

“It's cold during the night, isn't it?” he says casually and looks straight ahead, paying no attention to the astonished look on my face. “Don't forget to check the weather next time.”

I touch the scarf, which smells so much like him. It's irresistible. After only a few seconds of hesitation, I tighten his scarf around my neck and instantly feel warmer.

We walk together to the parking lot where he parks his car, which turns out to be a black Audi. Very low-profile. Very unlike him.

“What happened to your fancy sports cars?” I turn to him and ask.

“I sold them.”

I gasp in surprise. I can still remember the proud in his voice when he told me about his car collections, and now he is telling me that he sold them?

Did his family go bankrupt?

“Why? Do you have a financial difficulty?”

He blinks and then bursts into laughter, “ Oh no, nothing like that. I needed money to start my own business, so I sold them for a good price. Plus, I can’t have my business partners see me driving around in a gaudy convertible...doesn’t seem very reliable that way.”

I don’t know which word makes me more surprised, “business” “gaudy” or “reliable”?

He really has changed a lot. And it makes it harder for me to read him.

“Why don’t you ask Mr. Ramirez for the money?” I ask.

His face darkens for a quick second and then he quickly covers it with a smile, “do you want to have dinner or ask question?”

He is dogging my question. That I am sure of.

He unlocks the car and open the passenger’s door for me. Before I get in the car, I suddenly notice a darker area on his left shoulder. It looks like a water stain from the rain.

But he was holding an umbrella large enough for us two.

Then it suddenly hits me. I was walking on the right side of him. So he must be leaning the umbrella more towards my side to make sure I’m perfectly sheltered from the rain. That’s how his left shoulder got wet.

“Something wrong?” he notices my moment of lost and asks.

“No! No, it’s nothing...I—nothing.”-

I quickly lower my head and get in the car, avoiding his gaze so that he doesn’t notice my red eyes.

Stop being so sweet and gentle to me! He is only making this so much harder than it already is.

Sit in his car, I quickly take a deep breath to calm myself down before he gets in.

“So, what do you want to eat?” he starts the engine and asks me.

I’m really exhausted, physically and emotionally. I’m really not in the mood for dinner and just want to lie down. But my gut feeling is telling me that if I turn him down now, I’ll probably not see him in a very long time.

“I don’t know...a simple bite perhaps?” I force out a smile. “It’s late and I’m sure you have things to do tomorrow. I don’t want to take too much of your time.”

He doesn’t say anything and just drive out of the parking lot. When the car goes into the rain, he turns on the radio.

A song is playing, Whatever It Takes, by Life house.

I’ve heard of the song before but never really paid any attention to the lyrics. And now I’m trapped in the car with nothing to do but to listen carefully, it just occurred to me that, ironically, this song tells the exact story of us.

“...A strangled smile fell from your face;

What kills me that I hurt you this way;

The worst part is that I didn’t even know;

Now there’s a million reasons for you to go;

But if you can find a reason to stay...”

I suddenly feel the air getting thinner around me.

It’s so awkward listening to this song with Eason, who has also done me wrong in the past. But I don’t know if he has ever regretted it or not.

We have both moved on, but this song just snapped us back to those painful pasts.

And it’s still going in the background.

“...I’ll do whatever it takes;

To turn this around;

I know what's at stake;

I know that I've let you down;

And if you give me a chance;

Believe that—”

The song stops abruptly.

Eason turned off the radio.

I know why he turned it off, because unlike the singer, he doesn't have any regret for the past and isn't trying to ask for another chance with me.

It's been so long already. He has moved on to a greater life.

I clench the strap of my bag in the darkness and struggle to fight back those hot tears in my eyes. I can't let him find out that this song brought out the emotional side of me, which is weak and pathetic.

I need to pretend that I'm cool with everything, just like he is.

“So,” he finally breaks the awkward silence. “Tough day at work?”

“...Sort of. I spilled a drink on your girlfriend, remember?” I'm glad that my voice sounds natural and calm, so I carry on with a light tone. “I'm really sorry about that. But I got fired for it and I guess we are even?”

“You got fired?” his voice suddenly turns darker and lower.

“Umm, yeah. It is my fault, nevertheless. Can't really complain about that.”

“But don't you think it's a bit unfair? Getting fired over something really small like that?”

I almost laugh out. I guess the innocent side of him has remained unchanged.

“There's no real fairness in this world, Eason. Normal people like us can only be really careful about every little thing in our lives, or those little things will turn into a real b*tch and come back at us. Of course, people like you won't understand.”

I said that and immediately realized that the final sentence sounded more sarcastic and mean than I intended to be.

He remained silence driving his car with his face hidden in the darkness. I don't know what he's thinking.

I've regretted it already. We won't see each other after this one night. Why turn it into another fight?

"So..." I change the subject, trying to lighten the mood. "Your girlfriend seems nice. How long has it been? How did you guys meet?"

"Nice? You call the person who got you fired nice?" there's a hint of amusement in his voice.

I sigh, "I'm trying to start a decent conversation here. Be a good boy and play along, OK?"

He chuckles lowly and then says, "I think food is a better idea than talking."

He pulls over to the side. I look through the window and see a little Taco joint at the corner.

"Wait here," he says and then gets off the car.

I sit there quietly, my eyes following him as he walks up to the Taco joint and orders our food. Staring at his back, I suddenly go into a trance.

I can barely recognize him now. He used to be so bossy, arrogant, and haughty; yet now he is the exact opposite version of his old self: sophisticated, grounded, and reliable.

I should be relieved that he has changed. But the truth is, I feel sad.

It's sad that he has turned into a better person, but he doesn't belong to me anymore.

He comes back to the car with two plates of fish tacos and hand me one. I immediately take a huge bite. It's so freaking delicious and immediately brings my appetite back to life.

We both dig into our food without saying anything and finish up the plate very quickly. When he throws away the garbage and comes back to the car again, I suddenly realize that this is going to be the end of tonight.

We've got no reason to stay with each other anymore.

He sits the driver's seat in silence, maybe thinking about the same thing. I suddenly feel a bit nervous.

Will he ask me to do something else with him? Maybe grab a drink, catch up a little ... I'm not sure if I'll say yes, but if he insists "What's your address? I'll drive you home," he says lowly.

Oh.

I let out a breath that I've been holding. It's silly to feel upset, really. Of course he didn't want to stay with me anymore... why would he?

The drive to my apartment is extremely quiet. He never turned on the radio again, for obvious reasons. And we never talk again. I guess we could ask each other about how things have been for the past three years and reminisce our history together, like most exs who ended on good terms would do.

But there are just too many traumas and bitterness between us. We don't dare to look back.

Eventually, the car arrives at my apartment. He kills the engine and turns to look at me, meeting eyes with me in the darkness.

"So...this is me," I murmur.

He nods without a word.

My mind is going through a brutal inner struggle. And after a short pause, without thinking it through, I blurt out:

"... do you want to—maybe come upstairs and have something to drink?"

It's a f***king, stupid idea.

But there, I've said it. No regret.

He remains silent. Those 5 seconds are literally the longest and most painful moment in my entire life.

And then I hear him say in a deep and gravelly voice, "...Natalia I don't think it's a good idea."

He is right.

I have to control every fiber of me to stop shaking and smile as calmly as possible, "You are right. It's getting late. You better go home to be with your girlfriend. Bye, Eason."

With that said, I push open the car door and rush into the rain, not daring to look back.

As I escape into the building, tears start streaming down my cheek. Embarrassment, shame, sadness...all those intense emotions surge up inside of my chest. I swore to myself not to cry for him again, but I guess it's impossible for me.

I run up to the third floor and am ready to bury myself under my sheets.

But I suddenly stop abruptly at the top of the staircase.

To my surprise, there's a man sitting in front of my apartment door, with a baseball bat besides him. My landlord.

Author

Whatever It Takes, by Lifehouse. Highly recommended. Heartbreaking song.

In Love With My Evil Stepbrother Chapter 73

Read In Love With My Evil Stepbrother Chapter 73 – Homeless

I almost stutter, “M—Mr. Johnson, what are you doing here?”.

He picks up his baseball bats and points it at me, “What does it seem like? I’m here to move you out of my house! Hurry up! Don’t make me force you.”

I take a step back, staring at his baseball bat warily. Mr. Johnson is a little hot tempered, yes, but I didn’t think of him as someone who would beat the shit out of his tenants just because they missed one payment.

“What are you doing with that bat?” I ask carefully keeping my safe distance with him. “There’s no need for that. I-I can call the police!”

He rolls his eyes at me, “Cut the crap little girl. I don’t hit woman, but if you

keep mooching off me, I might lose my temper. So get moving, now!”

“Please, Mr. Johnson. Just one more chance. I promise you I’ll get the rent ready by the end of this month. Something happened at work, and I didn’t

“NO!!” he roars, covering his eyes with his hands. “No excuses! You said the same thing last month and you still came back empty-handed. I sent you an evacuation notice a week ago so technically, I’m on the legal high ground here! Call the police or a f**king lawyer if you want, but you are still moving out, TODAY!”

I clench my backpack and stand there still, fighting with my own embarrassment. He’s right. I didn’t pay for my rent on time so technically he can throw me out anytime he wants.

But why today? Why make things worse for me when they are already bad enough?

“Oh god,” Mr. Johnson mumbles frustratedly, waving his bat like a whip. “You are not crying, are you? Don’t make me seem like the bad guy here. Come one, hurry. Let’s get you start packing.”

I drag my steps to the door and open the door with my keys. He follows me in, starting to check up on everything while I pack my stuffs.

My mind is a mess the entire time. This is the first time I get thrown out. What should I do? Well, I have class tomorrow morning so I can probably huddle up on a bench in the park for tonight and go straight to class, that is if I don’t get frozen to death under this weather. I’ll have to find another job and live in a motel before I get settled down again...

How much does a motel cost again?

While I’m thinking all these, Mr. Johnson comes out of the kitchen and says to me gruffly, “Well, no wallpaper damage, no busted toilet, no f**king blood stains on the carpet. You are not a bad tenant, that I must say.”

“...Yet you are still kicking me out,” I close my suitcase and murmurs.

“I can’t have you live here for free, can I? What would my other tenants think? So, are you ready to go?”

I only have three suitcases and one backpack. He helps me with the heaviest one and escorts me downstairs.

Once we are at the ground floor, he turns to me and asks, “There’s a cheap motel three blocks away. You need a ride?”

I hesitate a little and say yes. I’m really not in the mood to walk another three blocks under this weather.

“You should be thankful that I have a daughter about your age,” he grunts and pushes open the entrance door for me. “I’m not normally this nice to tenants, you know? I usually just beat them out with my bats, and what the hell?”

He suddenly snaps and scares me a bit. I follow his gaze and then see a black Audi parked right in front of the entrance of the building.

It’s Eason’s car.

I’m literally too shocked to say a word.

It’s almost 2 in the morning, two hours after he dropped me off!

What's he still doing here?

Mr. Johnson glares at the car and huffs, "Who parked the f***king car here! Can't he see the No Parking sign? What if an ambulance needs to come through? Screw it, I'm having it towed!"

"Wait..." I try to stop him.

The next second, the car door flies open, and Eason jumps off the car. There are black circles under his eyes for the lack of sleep. Now his face is filled with rage as he strides over to us and drags me behind his back with one hard pull.

"Lose the bat!" Eason snarls to Mr. Johnson. "And drop her bags down! Now!"

Mr. Johnson widens his eyes in shock and roars back, "Who the f***k are you?!"

Eason narrows his eyes dangerously at Mr. Johnson and then whispers back to me, "Get in the car, Natalia."

There seems to be a misunderstanding. I place my hand on his shoulder and immediately feel his hard muscle flexed under the shirt. He is really tensed up right now.

"Seriously! Who is this d*uch*bag?" Mr. Johnson shouts.

I quickly step in between them before things get out of control, "Eason calm down! I know him. He is my landlord."

Eason snaps his head around and frowns at me, clearly not buying my words. "Your landlord? What's he doing here 2 o'clock in the morning with all your belongings and a baseball bat?"

Before I can answer, Mr. Johnson grumbles in a surly voice, "Why don't you ask your little girlfriend? If she pays her rent on time, I'd be home sleeping right now!"

Me and Eason blurt out simultaneously:

"...I'm not his girlfriend!"

"She didn't pay for her rent?"

We exchange an awkward glance with each other and quickly look away. I can feel my cheek burning with embarrassment.

Mr. Johnson lets out a snort, "Alright. It seems that you guys clearly know each other. Kid, take her home tonight if you can. She just went homeless. And move your damn car."

With that said, he drags his steps away,
not paying any attention to the ugly look on my face.

Why the hell does he have to mention to my ex that I'm "homeless"????

Great, now I'm not only alone and single, but also poor and broke.

Eason slowly turns his head at me, "Natalia, what did he mean by homeless?"

"...Doesn't concern you." I murmur.

Why is he still pestering me about this? Can't he just let it go?!

I move forward to kick up my bags, but he grabs my elbow from behind and forces me to face him, "Where are you going? Did you just get kicked out? Talk to me, Natalia!"

"Enough!!" I cry out furiously, shaking his hand off and taking a few steps back.

I've been trying to contain my feelings till we met.

But I can't help it anymore.

"Seriously!" I roar to his face. "Why are you still here? Why waited me at the restaurant?! I know we used to f**k each other but everything is in the past! Now you are like a total stranger to me! So stop bothering me!! If you want to show off your hot girlfriend and how successful you are, mission completed! Now can you just f**king leave?!!"

My shrill and wild yelling echoes in the empty street, like a siren scaring off a few stray cats in the corner.

And he stands there still during the outburst, slightly lowering his head, making it hard for me to see the look on his face.

He must be thinking how pathetic and ridiculous I am.

I struggle to pick up all three suitcases and march into the rain, stumbling forward. I don't know where I'm going. I just want to be away from Eason, as far as possible.

All I was asking is to have a little dignity. But that's not gonna be possible since he just saw the ugliest side of my life.

I wonder around on the street with three giant suitcases, soaking myself under the rain. The cold rain shower calmed me down a little, and I began to regret my outburst.

Honestly, yelling at him doesn't make any sense. He was probably just trying to be nice to me since I'm still his stepsister. But I made a whole speech about him pestering me and how we used to f**k each other, making it seem like that I still care,

So stupid, Natalia.

I finally arrive at a bus station before freezing to death. Dropping all my bags on to the ground, I slump onto the bench, staring into the dark night and starting to think what to do.

Just then, a bright flashlight pierces through the night. I turn around. It's his black Audi again, slowly approaching and finally making a stop in front of me.

He has been following me.

At this point, I'm already passed the stage of rage. I can only stare numbly at him, as he exits the car and walks up to me.

Tatocci..

He takes off his coat and wraps it around me before sitting down.

We sit there silently for a moment, listening to the splattering sound of rain fall.

Eventually, I ask lowly and exhausted, "Why are you still following me? I thought I made my point perfectly clear."

He sighs deeply, "You think I can just let you walk away like that? You were alone and hom_»

"Don't say that word!" I warn him sternly.

"—and clearly facing some troubles. I can't just watch and do nothing."

"But why not?" I ask, utterly confused. "Why do you care?"

That question has been hunting me till we met.

He is kind to me, almost too kind. It makes me wonder if he is secretly plotting something else against me, like in the old days.

Hearing me asked that, he lapses into another round of silence. His elbows rests on his knees, making his shoulders seem very broad and his firm muscles very apparent under the shirt.

He has grown to become a man now.

Eventually, he speaks up slowly, "Does it surprise you? That I'm nice to you now?"

"...A little."

He heaved a long sigh and smiles faintly, "Don't worry. I'm not scheming anything evil against you. I'm nice to you because... well, I'm trying to make it up for my

mistakes in the past. You are right, we've both moved on. But you are still my sister and the victim of my wrongdoing. I can't stand by idly knowing that you are in trouble."

He sounds sincere.

But do I trust him? I don't know, maybe.

Yet one thing I do know is that my heart is aching with sadness and pain hearing him call me his sister and nothing else.

"So, what's your plan?" he asks. "You can't stay here all night."

"There's a motel a few blocks away. Can you give me a ride?"

He stares at me quietly.

"What?"

"I was just wondering..." he begins slowly. "...would it be extremely inappropriate if I invite you to my place?"

In Love With My Evil Stepbrother Chapter 74

Chapter 74: Under the Same Roof

I let him take me home eventually.

I know this is a terrible idea and the wise thing to do is go find a place on my own and stay as far from him as possible. But so many ups and downs in one night, my head has already stopped functioning. So I go for the easy option.

Not surprisingly, he lives in the fanciest place in the Upper East side. His apartment is huge and well-decorated, just like the one he had in Boston.

I carefully step into the foyer, feeling both awkward and nervous. I glance around the spacious living room and notice no sign of traces of a woman.

So he and his girlfriend don't live together.

"Why are you still standing there?" he turns around and smiles at me. "Come on in."

I slowly inake my way into the open kitchen, staring at him as he opens the fridge and gets me a bottle of water, and asks, "Are you sure your girlfriend won't mind?"

He shirugs, "Why should she mind?"

"Because if my boyfriend brought a someone home without asking me first, I would be pretty annoyed, which is how most people would react?" I point out the obvious

He slightly raises his eyebrows, giving no comments on my concern. And again, that makes me even more curious about his relationship with his girlfriend. First he totally ignored her in

the restaurant twice, then lie brought me liome without telling her, which all seem very absurd

"Don't worry. We just started dating. Nothing serious just yet," he leans against the kitchen counter, his green eyes fixing on me. "So, speaking of which, how are things going between you and Liam?"

I'm little thrown off by his question, "...Me and Liam?"

His lips curves in a faint smile, "Helad a thing for you three years ago. Did that thing develop into anything serious for you two?" I bite down my bottom lips, feeling very uncomfortable about where this conversation is going

"He's only my brother," I quickly answer trying to dodge around the subject

"But did he make any moves?" Yet he is not letting go.

I take in a deep sigli and start to feel frustrated. "Eason, it's been a long day. Do you really want to stand here and ask me about -" He cuts me off before I finish, "Do you feel uncomfortable talking to me about this?"

He has been polite and gentle since we met, but that seulence reminds me of the old him, the aggressive and condescending version of liim.

I frown and reinine silent.

He stares at me intensely, studying every detail of the look on my face, and then suddenly he smiles, "sorry for crossing the line. But I thought since we've both moved on already, it'd be

OK for me to ask." "Ask something else," I say gruffly. He chuckles lowly, "OK I will."

He says nothing else and shows me to the guest room. I take a quick shower and finally lie down on the bed.

A million things happened today, meeting Eason again, losing my job, being kicked out of my apartment and staying at Eason's... I suddenly remembered that three years ago I also spent a night at his place after lighting with my parents; he kissed me in front of all his friends, which was the start of our toxic relationship.

Now things seem to circle back to the same spot, except that we both have changed.

#

##

The next morning, I wake up at 9. Going into the living room, I find him standing beside the kitchen counter in his gym clothes and sneakers and checking his phone.

"Morning," he turns around and greets me with a smile. "Coffee?" I walk to him, "Yes please."

He pours me a cup and asks, "Did you sleep well last night?"

"Yes. Thank you again for letting me stay."

"No problem. So do you have anything planned out today? Because I -" My phone starts ringing before he finishes. I give him an apologetic smile and turns around to pick up, "Hello? Liam?"

I didn't notice that Eason's face quickly drops hearing Liam's name.

"Natalia! Why didn't you answer my call yesterday? Did something happen?"

A lot of things happened, but I didn't want Liam to worry. "No! I was just busy with work. So what's up?"

"Mom mailed me the Christmas sweater and some handmade pastries. But she accidentally sent yours to me. So I'm mailing your to you now. Same address?"

"Ummm..." I hesitate.

No way I'm letting him know that I'm homeless now. "I moved actually," I stutter. "You don't need to send anything to me. You can keep them."

"Why would I keep a petite size girl's sweater? And inom would kill me if you don't get to taste her pastries," he laughs. "You moved? What's your new address then?" "My new address – "I take a quick glance at Eason, who is staring at me with his arms crossed, and then says, "-I'll text you my new address." "Awesome. Don't forget to call miom when you have time. She really misses you. Bye, Natalia." i hang up and Eason immediately demands, "Liam? What does he want?"

I slightly frown at his tone, "Nothing. So where were we...oh right. I'll go apartment hunting today. Hopefully I can find a place to stay, and I'll move out as soon as possible. I promise. I

won't bother you for too long." His jaw tenses. The look on his face is hardly pleasant. After a short pause, he shrugs and says coldly, "whatever."

He turns to leave for the bathroom and stops the inidway, "you can give him the address here. It's not that easy to find a new apartment in a rusli." I was hoping that he was wrong about the new apartment thing. But after a few days' trying, I am forced to admit that lie was right.

It's very hard to find a suitable apartment, especially since I have a very tight budget. My only two options are sharing a small apartinent with four boys with no private bathroom or living in another state, which isn't that cheap if I count in the traveling expense.

Besides the apartment, I also need a new job. And the worst thing is, my finals are quickly approaching. I must inake time to study if I don't want to fail my classes.

Every morning when I get up at 6, it is go go go. Calling for job interviews, making appointments with apartment agents, preparing for my finals...I'm so busy that I even forget the last time I stop to take a breath.

Luckily, Eason isn't home much. He also has schoolwork, and he has business stuffs to manage. We barely see nor speak to each other, which is a good thing because that means don't need to face his awkward questions and I get to have the whole apartment to myself

A week has passed. And it is Friday again.

i have made zero process on the apartment thing. I feel exhausted and am desperately in need for a little break. So after school, I made a stop at the grocery store, planning on making mysell a dinner, because gods know when was the last time I sat down for a proper meal.

While I am shopping, Eason calls in

“Hey. What are you doing?”

“Shopping for dinner. Oh, can I use your kitchen?” I ask.

“Of course, you don’t need to ask for my permission,” he says. “Are you just making dinner for yourself?”

“Yeah. It’s not like I have a guest. Unless you are coming home for dinner.”

He pauses for a short moment and then says, “I am coming home for dinner, actually.”

“What?” now it’s my turn to be surprised. His background sounds very buzzing, so I was assuming that he must be at a dinner party or a gala now. And I recalled that he carried a suitcase with him this morning, so I thought he would be out of town tonight. “You are coming home? But – Where are you now?”

“I’m...I’m in another city for a meeting. But I am flying back today and will get back home before 10,” his breathing sounds a bit rushed. “Can you make dinner for two?”

“OK. Not a problem. See you later.”

He sounds weird. If he’s not spending the night in another city, why bothered carrying a suitcase? I purchase all ingredients I need and head back home. Now that I think about it, I haven’t

cooked for him before. So I decide to make him my famous dish, seafood spaghetti with apple pie as desert, as a little thank you for letting me stay at his house.

Time flies back while I am cooking. When I check the time again, it’s already 9:30. He should be home soon. I wipe my hands and decide to call him asking how far away lie is.

And just then, the doorbell buzzes.

“I was just about to call you!” I rush to the door yelling. “Did your forget your ke-” Yet the final word vanishes as soon as I see who is outside of the door. It’s a tall guy with dark hair and dark eyes, dressed in a black coat. He smiles at me and bends down to hug me, but I am too stunned to say anything. “Hey Natalia. Happy to see me?” “L-Liam!” I stammer, totally panicked. “What brought you here?”

In Love With My Evil Stepbrother Chapter 75

Chapter 75: Engaged “I was worried about you,” he frowns and says. “You gave me a new address without (elling me why you moved, and you rarely answered my calls for

the past few days, so I came down here to check on you. Are you OK? Whose house is this?"

I wasn't intentionally ignoring his calls. I was so busy for the past whole week that I didn't even have the time to check my phone

As I try to stammer an excuse, a flicker of doubt appears in his eyes. I know what he is thinking this is a fancy apartment located in upper east side, somewhere I apparently can't afford.

"Are you..." he slowly begins, "...dating someone?" "No!" I quickly begin.

I can't have him know that I'm living with Eason right now. He won't understand. Plus, this is only a temporary arrangement anyway, so there's no need for him to know and I can spare his worries.

"My lease expired so I'm staying with a friend before I get a new apartment," I say, and it is partly the truth

"Oh," he nods, slightly relieved. "Aren't you going to invite me in?"

There is no good excuse to keep him out, so I can only step aside and let him in.

But it's already 9:30.

"Wow the food smells great," he notices the dishes on the table. "Though it's a bit too much if you are eating alone are you cooking dinner for someone?"

Another question I can't answer. I have no choice but to make up another excuse: "I didn't make those. It's my roommate. She is cooking for her boyfriend. They will be back soon."

"Oh. Then we shouldn't stick around and disturb them. Can I take you out for dinner? You haven't had dinner yet, have you?"

This is exactly what I want, getting him out of the apartment before Eason comes back. But this way I won't be able to have dinner with Eason.

Screw it, I can't care for so much. The priority is to stop them from meeting each other. "Great," I force out a smile. "Can you wait here a second? I'll go change." I let him hang out in the living room and go into my room. Carefully closing the door, I take out my phone and call Eason. He picks up on the first ring, "Hey Natalia I'm almost"

"You aren't home yet, are you?" I blurt out.

He pauses, and then his voice deepens. "Not yet. What's up?" "I'm terribly sorry. But something came up at school and I need to get down there. I had

everything ready on the table. Just eat up and don't wait for me." "You don't even have time for dinner?" he sounds annoyed. "I fly all the way back home just to have dinner with you. Can't you go tomorrow?" "Wait wait wait...you said " gulp and then carry on in disbelief, "-you flied home just to have dinner with me? But your meeting ends today right? You were planning on coming home today anyway, weren't you? Please tell me you didn't come back for-for me."

He lapses into silence again.

I clench the phone as a complicated feeling fills my heart. I'm both terrified and nervous right now. Terrified because I'm afraid of the possibility that he still has any special feelings for me, and nervous because there's a small part of me that wants him to say yes.

A short moment later, he sighs and murmurs lowly, "No of course not."

"...Oh."

I guess I should be relieved.

Just then, Liam knocks on my door, "Natalia are you ready?"

I hastily cover the speaker and whisper, "I gotta go. Talk to you later, Eason."

After hanging up, I grab a coat and exit to the living room. "I'm ready. Let's go."

Liam takes me to a small pub, where I order burger and fries and he gets a beer. We sit there and talk. He is fun, sophisticated and easy-to-talk-to as usual. I am willing to share my troubles at school and work with him because he can always provide a new perspective for me. I love the quality time we spend together. During dinner, he asks about the status of my relationship again. "Mom called a couple days ago. She is wondering if you are seeing anyone right now."

I laugh, "Does she want to know? Or do you want to know?"

He shrugs and laugh with me, "You got me. I can't say I'm not at all curious."

"Well excuse me for not wanting to share details of my love life with my brother."

He slightly raises his eyebrow and gives me a long look, "Your brother? Huli."

I lower my head and dig into my burger, avoiding his gaze. I know that he has a thing for me. And over the years, there were a few romantic moments between us. But I have been very careful not to cross the boundary, because, clearly, dating your hot stepbrother is a terrible

idea.

I've learnt my lesson. Swallowing down the bite, I continue, "And honestly, there's nothing to share. My life is totally occupied by school and work. Even if I want to date, I have no time." "I know. All I'm saying is that don't waste out college. Just let me know if you need my help." He is back to being a big brother to me. I smile at him gratefully. He knows that I'm not ready to respond to him, so he never pushes me.

He is a very nice person, unlike Eason.

After dinner, Liam insists on sending me home. When we finally get back to the apartment building, Liam stops at the entrance door and says, "so good luck with school, work and apartment hunting. I'll see you at Christmas?" I hesitate a bit, "I haven't decided yet...but I might need to spend this Christmas in Boston. Mom called me a lot recently."

"Oh," he seems disappointed. "But it's true that you haven't seen her for a long time. But doesn't that mean that you are going to see...him?"

He is talking about Eason.

I shrug and pretend to be casual about it. "It's ancient history. Me and Eason are still related. It's not like that I can avoid him forever."

What Liam doesn't know is that Eason is right upstairs and we have already met again.

"Well, in that case I'll see you after Christmas. Or you can visit me sometimes. Let me show you around the city," he opens his arms and smiles, flashing his white teeth at me. "Goodbye hug for your big brother?"

I laugh and hug him back. I'm very lucky to have him by my side for these past three years. He helped me to manage through my darkest days. "Take care, Liam."

Yet before we let go of each other, suddenly a deadly voice comes from behind us:

"Natalia?"

We both jump and jerk around. My heart drops hearing the voice. Not surprisingly, it's him, Eason, standing by the elevator and staring at us gloomily with his arms crossed.

What is he doing downstairs!

Liam is totally shocked beyond words. He glares at Eason in disbelief, and then snaps his head around to me and growls, "What the hell is he doing here? Is he bothering you again Nat?"

"No! It's nothing like that! Liam I can explain—"

"Natalia is staying with me now," Eason says calmly.

And that's the last straw. Liam lets out a furious roar and strides over to Eason. He grabs Eason's collar in one hand and points a finger at him, "I'm warning you, you bastard. Stay away from her! You are lucky enough that we didn't call the police three years ago in the bar, but I don't mind doing that now if you try any dirty shit on her again!"

I rush forward and try to put a little distance between them, "Stop Liam! It's nothing like that! He helped me after I lost my apartment. We are friends now. He is not doing anything inappropriate"

Liam's hand loosens and I finally manage to drag him away. He stares at me, a hint of annoyance and disbelief flickering in his dark eyes, and after a while he finally asks me:

"You lost your apartment? Why didn't you say anything to me?"

I stammer, not knowing what to say. The truth is that I don't want to take his money anymore. I am not attracted to him, so it feels

wrong to have him keep helping me financially. I know he doesn't mind, but I don't want things to be complicated between us. A clear disappointment appears on Liam's face. After a long pause, he sighs, raking his fingers through his hair and says, "Never mind. I can't let you stay here anymore. Let's go. I'll get you somewhere else to stay tonight." He grabs my hand to leave, but Eason holds on to my other hand. Now I'm like a string, being pulled from both ends.

Eason stares at Liam coldly. Though there's no clear hostility on his face, his tone is filled with defiance. "Don't you think we should let Natalia decide?"

"Fine!" Liam snaps and turns to me. "Nat, don't forget what he has done. People don't change."

Now they put me in a very difficult situation.

The truth is that I don't want to leave. It's not that I really want to live with Eason, but simply because I don't want Liam to spend any more money on me, I know if I go with him, he will insist on paying for an apartment for me, which is simply too much.

Even though Eason and me have a complicated history, I'm pretty sure that we've both moved on now.

But I also know that if I say I want to stay, Liam will snap.

Admit silence, Eason suddenly speaks up. "I know you don't trust me. But Natalia and I are only friends now and nothing more. I live in New York, so it's easier for me to look after her. Nothing weird is going on between us. I can promise you that."

"Oh yeah?" Liam lets out a sarcastic and cold snort. "How can you promise? Like you said, you don't seem like a trustworthy guy."

Eason sighs. He grits his teeth, and after a while, he finally says: "I'm engaged and about to get married soon. Now you trust me?"

In Love With My Evil Stepbrother Chapter 76

Chapter 76: His Mysterious Fiancé

Liam eventually left, even though he still found Eason hard to trust. Before he left, he repeated several times that I should let him know the moment I notice something is wrong with Eason and he'll fly to New York personally to help me move out of this apartment.

I didn't really pay attention to every word Liam said, because my full heart is hang up by the news Eason just told us.

...He is engaged, and about to get married?

To whom? And when?

A million questions are whizzing inside of me while I follow Eason upstairs, Stepping inside of the apartment, I notice that the dinner I left for him is still on the table, untouched.

Eason takes of his coat and throws it on the coachi. He turns back to me, green eyes plaring with a hint of anger, and snaps: "Why did you lie to me

I wis about to ask him about the entirement thing, but he beats me on this and asks first Catching me off guard.

"W

what lie"

“You said you couldn’t have dinner with me because I came up at school, which clearly was a

Histone is very accusative, as if I have done something unforgivable. I stand there embarrassed for a moment, and then start to feel irritated.

Yes I lied to him. But he also kept me in the dark, didn’t he? For the whole time I thought he was only dating, he didn’t even bother to let me know that he was about to walk down the aisle with someone I don’t even know!

So I shot back, “Yes I lied to you! But so what? You had lied to me countless times before, terrible lies! And I’ve forgiven you. Surely I’m allowed to do that once!”

His face darkens, and he lapses into silence. For a moment, there’re only heavy breathings from both of us and nobody says a word,

I bite down my bottom lips, trying to fight back the sudden wave of sadness in my heart.

He is engaged. He is about to be someone else’s husband.

So many things have happened on him that I didn’t know of. This is the very first time that I’m forced to realize that we’ve all gone too far to look back

Eventually, he speaks up in a hoarse voice, “...you still blame me for things I’ve done, don’t

you?”

I take in a deep breath and quickly wipe the corner of my eyes, “Why does it matter Eason? Just ...don’t.”

I’m still trapped in the same place I was three years ago, and yet he’s already moved on to his glamorous life.

should I blame him? Even if I do, there’s nothing he could do about it.

He’s about to get married, nevertheless, “This is a mistake Eason,” I murmur. “I shouldn’t stay here. I – I should go.” I turn to leave for my room, but he grabs my elbow from behind and forces me back. He stares at me intensely, a vein popping on his forehead.

“I didn’t ask you to leave,” he says sternly.

“But I want to go! OK? Seriously why do you want to keep me here? You are engaged and about to get married! This–this is wrong!”

“But why does it bother you so much? Huh?” he suddenly asks. His gaze is so sharp that I’m afraid that he might see through me. “You were perfectly fine with staying with me before. What changed? Why do you care whether I’m getting married or not?” I can barely look at him. I struggle to break free but he’s not letting me to leave. My body is shaking under his firm grip, and I bet he can feel it.

“Natalia...”

He suddenly calls my name, his voice deep and hoarse.

“Do you still...have feelings for me?”

How dare he ask me this?

I know I should jump up and scold at him the moment he asks me this. Or at least I should laugh at his face.

But feeling his hot palm touching my skin and his blazing eyes fixing on me, suddenly I’m at a loss for words. We stand there, so close to each other, like in the old days.

After a long while, I finally open my mouth and say weakly, “...No.”

That doesn’t sound very affirmative

So I quickly repeat again, “No I don’t. Don’t think too much of yourself.”

He stares at me, the look on his face unreadable. I slightly quail beneath his look and look away.

Fortunately, he doesn’t push me any further.

“Well then,” he says releasing my arm. “If you don’t have any feelings for me, you should have no problem staying here. I’m only giving you a hand as your brother and your friend. Don’t over think it.” “I didn’t over-think it!” I snap.

He shrugs, “Fine. So are we good?”

“Yes.” I reply stiffly.

He slightly narrows his eyes on me. A meaningful smile appears on his lips. “You still haven’t congratulated me on my engagement yet.”

Why does he have to be so cruel?!

But I don’t want to appear weak in front of him. So I clench my fist and grit out through my teeth, “.Congratulation.”

“Thank you.” He smiles, “Now I’m going to enjoy that dinner you made me. Care to join me?”

I march into my room without a word and slam the door close, shutting him outside.

I spend the rest of the time before Christmas to avoid Eason the best I can. I try to make my schedule tight, keeping my mind off the fact that he is engaged and about to get married. Luckily, my efforts get paid off and I finally find a new job and a new apartment. I’ll start moving after Christmas.

I’ve been thinking if I should go back to Boston for Christmas, given the awkward circumstances between me and Eason. But mom has been calling me non-stop and she promised me that Eason wouldn’t be at home during Christmas. So I eventually caved in.

On the first day of my winter break, I pack a small suitcase and prepare to catch the 4-hour bus back to Boston. Yet when I go into the living room, I’m surprised to see that Eason is standing hallway, sully dressed, with a car key in his hand. “Ready to go?” he asks me.

I look at him, perplexed. “What are you doing?”

He flashes me the car key. “What does it look like?”

You don’t need to drive me to the bus station. I can take the subway.”

He laughs, “No I’m not doing that. But I’m driving you to Boston.” “What?!” | gasp, shocked and irritated at the same time. Please tell me you are not coming back to Boston for Christmas!”

“Yet I am. That’s my home. Where else am I supposed to go?” he picks up my suitcase and starts heading out. “Hurry. Or we’ll be late for dinner.”

I chase behind his back, following him into the elevator and down to the garage. “But what about your girlfriend? Mom told me that you were going to spend Christmas with her.”

He looks at me, bemused. “My girlfriend?”

“Yeah? The one I met in the restaurant? The one who got me fired?” I snap.

“Oh!” he laughs out. “Yes that was the plan. But we broke up.”

...What did he just say?

“You broke up with your fiancé?” I ask, astounded.

"No she is not my fiancé. She is just my girlfriend. Well, ex-girlfriend to be precise," he walks up to his car and opens the door for me. "Let's go. We have 4 hours ahead of us."

He just gave me too much information to process. And I just realized that I never asked him to whom he is engaged to. "So, you are engaged, but you are also dating someone else?" I ask, while he drives us out of the garage. "Sort of," says him with a shrug. "That's cheating!" I argue sharply, "Aren't you ashamed of yourself?"

Yet he doesn't seem to mind my accusation. With his hands on the wheel and eyes straight ahead, he smiles, "I've never met my fiancé before. Don't know what she looks like either. You can't really cheat on someone you've never met before." 1 That's even more absurd. "If you've never met her, why on earth are you engaged?"

"My mother got into this. She always wants me to be engaged and to get married as soon as I graduate. I tried to fight her but...eventually I decide that it's better to let her have what she wants."

I know Ms. Griswold. She is a strong and aggressive woman, who won't give up until her wish is fulfilled. But...

"But this is your marriage!" I exclaim in disbelief. "You will spend the rest of your life with that woman. Don't you think you should get to know her a little bit better before rushing into this?"

"And that's why I'm coming back to Boston this time, to finally get to know her under my mother's supervision. I'm not a fan of this arrangement, but..."

He tails off. I turn my head to him and find his face dark and sulky. "But?" I ask carefully, involuntarily holding my breath. He shakes his head and laughs briefly in a self-deprecating way, "But I guess I don't really care about it either. If I'm not marrying the girl I love, I can marry whoever my mom wants."

My heart stops for a second. But before I ask any other questions, he has already changed the subject, "Music?" We both remain silent for the rest of the drive. And after 4 long hours, we finally arrive at Boston.

I look through the window and feel a nostalgic feeling rising in my heart. It's been 3 years and I'm finally back

I'm so looking forward to meeting my mom, Mr. Rainirez and my friends, Alex, Katherine. and Eddie.. And most importantly, Eason's mysterious fiancé.

In Love With My Evil Stepbrother Chapter 77

Chapter 77: Who can it be? Mom is thrilled that I'm finally back. Upon seeing me, she pulled me into her arms for a big hug and didn't let go for one minute. She asked me a

lot of questions about my life in Miami and New York, and of course she didn't miss out the chance to interrogate me about the reason I left Boston three years ago.

"I had always been thinking that after you graduate high school, you could continue studying here. There are lots of great college in Boston and you could pick the one you like..."

I sigh, "Mom, I've told you before. I can't afford a fancy elite college." Seeing she opens her mouth in disapproval, I quickly add to that, "— And don't say that Mr. Ramirez is willing to help me! I'm not taking any more of his money."

She pouts.

"Fine...but I still don't understand why you needed to leave in such a hurry! You didn't even tell me and just got on a flight and left. Do you know what kind of damage it did to me? I kept thinking that I didn't something wrong,"

"Just let it go mom. It was three years ago. And I already said that I'm sorry."

"But wliy? At least you could give me a reason? Is it only me or are you really keeping a big secret that I'm not aware of?"

She grabs my hands and looks at me beseechingly. This isn't like when we were on the phone and I could simply make up an excuse and hung up. Now I'm literally trapped. Just then, Mr. Ramirez emerges from the kitchen with a cup of coffee in his hand. He makes his way to us and sits down beside mom, "What are we talking here?" 1 Mom complaints, "I was just asking Nat why she left without a goodbye three years ago. She wouldn't give me a good reason."

Mr. Ramirez slightly raises his brows and I suddenly feel my stomach churn in nervousness.

He knows why I left. He even chased me down to Miami personally and made me promise that I would put an end to everything between me and Eason.

So is he mad now that I'm back into the picture?

Is he going to tell my mom?

I stare at him with a hint of pleading in my eyes. After a short eye contact with me, Mr. Ramirez turns to mom again and smiles, "Does she need a good reason to go back home? Because don't forget that Miami is also her home."

I quietly let out a breath that I've been holding and give him a grateful look. He winks at me briskly

Mom didn't notice the brief exchange between us and is still frowning perplexed, "Sure but I

still don't understand,"

"OK enough of the interrogation and questioning. This is Christmas for god's sake," Mr. Ramirez gives a gentle pat on her shoulder and subtly changes the subject. "Ne you toll Natalia about the party yet?"

Mom's face lights up at the mention of the party, which is probably her second favorite thing in the world, right behind slopping. "Shawn has a few business partners to entertain so we are throwing a party in a few days. But we don't want to do it on Christmas because that day is for family only. So the party will be here on the day before Christmas Eve. You can invite all your friends over. How does that sound?"

It's not a bad idea actually. Although I hate any occasion with a lot of people, I do iniss my friends.

"Sounds great. I'll make some calls today," I say.

Mom claps in excitement, "Fantastic! Nat you don't have anything else to do today, right? Can you give me a hand with all the party stuffs?" 1

I nod when Mr. Ramirez rises from the sola and says, "Well, I'll leave you party experts to it. Let me know if you need me again."

He exits the living room. I stare at his back and quickly stands up as well, "Mom, I'll find you later...there's something I need to do."

I catch Mr. Ramirez below the staircase before he goes upstairs.

"Hmm Mr. Ramirez!" I call on to him. "I-I just want to thank you for...for everything you've done. And I really appreciate that you let me stay here for Christmas."

He smiles looking at me. "This is your home, Natalia. The past is in the past now. So you are welcomed here anytime."

I return a sheepish smile. He's always nice to me and I wonder if I'll ever be able to repay the favor.

"Oh and there's something else you should know about the party," he says slowly while carefully watching my face. "Eason's fiancé is going to be there."

My heart skips a leap. Yet I manage to keep my face under control.

“That’s nice. I heard that Eason is engaged now, and I’d love to meet my future sister-in-law,” I say breezily “And you will be fine with that?” he asks.

I pull up the corner of my lip and try to smile as sincere as possible. “Of course. I can’t wait to congratulate them.”

I don’t know if he trusts me fully or not. But judging by the satisfied look on his face, at least he is not suspecting anything just yet.

“Glad to hear that,” he pats me shoulder and goes up the staircase.

I sigh internally and return to the living room with a heavy heart.

I guess I’ll have to meet his fiancé sooner or later. Better get it over with,

Mom spends the next few days decorating the townhouse and by the day before Christmas Eve the entire house has been successfully transformed.

The front door and staircase are framed with beautiful garlands and light strings, perfect for both daytime and nighttime display. A giant swag is situated on the top of the mantel, and beside the mantel is a grouping of four poinsettias. The red flower really goes with the overall color palette.

And of course, the most eye-catching still in the living room is the giant Christmas tree, with hundreds of golden and glittering ornaments hanging on it. There’s a huge pile of beautifully wrapped gifts under the tree. Mon has decided to do a gift swap at the end of the party.

The party officially starts at 7. So guests start to arrive around 7:30. I stand by my mom’s side giving polite smiles to strangers I don’t know, until I finally see some familiar faces. “Alex! Katherine!”

I exclaim in delight and rush forward to greet my friends, giving a big hug to each of them. Alex hasn’t changed at all. And Katherine...well she looks fantastic She was already the center of attention back in high school and now she is even prettier.

“Oh my god! I miss you so much!! Eddie couldn’t come but he sends his regards,” Katherine hugs me back and cheers excitedly. “I’ll forgive you for leaving us in such a rush only if you give me full details of your life since then!”

I take them to the living room and offer them eggnogs. Then we start to talk

Alex is studying at Cornell and is currently dating someone. I’m really glad that he has moved on from his little crush on me. And Katherine went to Harvard, same as Eason.

I'm not surprised that both of them are in Ivy Leagues schools. With their GPAs and family backgrounds, they can easily get into any school they want.

"So you and Eason are in the same school?" I ask Katherine.

"Yes. But in different departments. I rarely get to see him." she quickly changes the subject, "Now enough about us. What about you?"

I then begin to tell them about my life, but I get distracted a lot and keep checking the front door. I'm waiting for Eason's fiance to show up. Yet up till now, I see no sign of that mysterious guest. Alex finally notices my absent-mindedness, "Nat are you expecting someone?"

"N-no. I was just looking for my mom. Umm do you guys need a refill?"

Before they say yes, I quickly take over their empty cups and go into the kitchen to calm myself down.

I need to compose myself. I can't let anyone notice that something is wrong with me.

On the way back, I bump into Eason, who is dressed in a neat suit and looks especially handsome today.

"Mary Christmas," he smiles warmly at me,

"Mary Christmas," I reply dryly. After a brief pause, I can't help but ask, "I heard that your fiancé is coming. When are you going to introduce her to us?"

He shrugs nonchalantly. "No idea. I haven't met her myself. Dad will introduce her before dinner, I suppose."

"As the future groom, aren't you at least a little bit curious?"

"Let's just say that I fully trust my mom's taste in selecting a marriage partner."

He lets out a cold and sarcastic sneer and then walks away.

The next hour is like hell. I keep telling myself that I should take my mind off Eason's fiancé. but I just can't stop myself from searching for my target in the crowd. So far I've noticed two possible candidates: one is the daughter of Mr. Ramirez's business partner, the other comes with his family friend.

"Natalia are you OK?" Katherine whispers beside my ear while I'm secretly checking one of the girls. "You've been staring at that poor girl like a hawk. Is something wrong?" I panic and quickly make something up, "I was just looking at her diamond necklace. It's pretty."

Katherine doesn't seem to suspect a thing and says, "Good eye. It's a sapphire high jewelry by Harry Winston. That girl's got money."

I take a sip from my eggnog and taste nothing but bitterness in my mouth.

"Yeah I bet she does..." I murmur dryly.

A little while later, Mr. Ramirez raises from his seat and clinks his glass. The crowd quiets down and looks over to him. "Family and friends, welcome." He looks around the room smiling, "I'm very happy to have every one of you here on this happy occasion..."

I spot Eason leaning against the piano drinking his wine. He seems bored.

"... Today, not only my son Eason and daughter Natalia are back home, but we are also about to welcome one more person into our little family. I would like to take this opportunity to introduce her to everyone here."

This is it!

I involuntarily straighten my back and hold my breath. Who can it be? Candidate number one with her sapphire necklace or candidate number two carrying the Hermes handbag?

Mr. Ramirez makes a dramatic little pause before continuing. And then, surprisingly, he looks at my direction. My mouth parts slightly in shock. Why is he looking at me? And finally, he calls upon the name of Eason's fiancé.

"Katherine."

Mr. Ramirez smiles pleasantly at our direction, "Are you willing to introduce yourself to everyone?"

What?