

Written in 1st Person, Past Tense

Chapter 1. Natalia

"I'd be lying if I said that I hate to tell you that I told you so," Meghan's voice sounded as smug as ever even through the phone speakers. If I know my best friend, she's wearing the biggest smirk on her face right now, probably jumping up and down with joy just the way I would've been if I wasn't worried about someone walking outside and seeing me.

"You were worried for absolutely no reason, just as always! You should really learn to listen to me, Natalia, I'm always right about everything, and you should know that by now!" she teased. "And if there's one thing I know better than anything, it's good food. You're an exceptional cook and there isn't a person alive who's tasted your food that can honestly say that they disliked it! That's why I recommended you in the first place!"

"Stop it," I murmured bashfully, unable to keep the smile off my face as I tucked my phone between my cheek and shoulder, beginning to rearrange some of the Tupperware in the back of my van just for the sake of keeping my hands busy. I was filled to the brim with so much adrenaline and excitement after tonight's success that I hardly knew what to do with myself! "Meghan, seriously, I can't thank you enough. I don't know how you managed it, but I owe you one. If it weren't for you convincing your boss to put in a good word for my catering business, I never would have even been considered in the first place!" Meghan works for a well-known event planner, and she was kind enough to put in a good word for me to Lisa, who ended up recommending me to cater the gala!

"Oh, please," Meghan laughed. "I don't know if 'convincing' is the right word for it. I mentioned your name once and barely managed to get another word out! You know June's Eatery is Lisa's favorite restaurant in the city! She was more than happy to put in a good word for your catering service with the King's family event planner, and when I mentioned that you were my best friend, she couldn't stop raving about your jerk chicken! It's her favorite item on the menu! She's been talking about wanting to work with you again in the future, but in my opinion, she'll be lucky if she can book you again any time soon. After tonight's success, I have a feeling that you'll be all booked up for the foreseeable future. Maybe she'll be able to get a seat in your restaurant at some point, though."

"You're too much," I twirled one of my thick locs around my finger, jaw aching from smiling so largely for such a long time. I've never been the type to do well when receiving so many compliments, not sure how to handle them, but Meghan's words only seemed to improve my already grand mood.

"And you're in denial if you think otherwise," she snickered. "I mean, you're only twenty-eight years old, you only started your business two years ago, and now you have your biggest

catering gig yet and it's for the annual King Foundation Charity gala for veterans. This is a huge deal! With a good review from one of the wealthiest families in Toronto, your business is going to be booming soon!"

Hearing Meghan say all that aloud felt so surreal. I'm still in utter disbelief, and it just doesn't seem like real life! Me, of all people, getting to cater such an exquisite gala for one of the wealthiest and most well-known families in Toronto...

The King family sat at the top of the elites of the city. The family was prominent in the twentieth century, building their empire through shipping and railroads. If you wanted to succeed in Toronto, it was a good idea to have them on your side. Though, there was only one surviving heir: Chandler King.

He was your typical billionaire bachelor and had been described as wild and impulsive by the media. It was a pretty accurate description if the things that I'd read about him were any indication.

He'd lost his parents at a young age and had been the beneficiary of their vast fortune. Three years ago, however, he'd simply disappeared. Apparently, he'd become some sort of recluse, but no one knew why.

Whatever the reason may be, I can't blame him. If I lived in a mansion like this, I'd hardly leave it either. The manor is absolutely beautiful! Solid gold gates with Chandler's initials engraved in them keep unwanted visitors out of the humongous yard. Green grass and brand-new cement walkways stretch throughout the yard for what seems like miles. Multi-colored flowers line the walkways, and there's even a beautiful garden toward the side of the manor. Hundred-year-old trees with pastel-colored flowers surround the mansion as well. It's stunning! I can only imagine what the inside looks like. I spent most of my time in the kitchen so I didn't get to see much, but I'm sure it's just as grand as the outside is.

"I hope so--" I continued.

"I *know* so," she insisted. "You stop being humble for just one second, Natalia June, or I won't stop raving about your success tonight for the rest of my life! Listen, you need to pat yourself on the back! You've been working so hard for so long and now you've accomplished something major! Successfully catering a King's Gala is no easy feat. Neither is running a restaurant, but you've managed to do that too. You know...I *loved* your brother's soul food. *Everyone* did! But the menu has never tasted better now that you've taken over."

I let out a quiet laugh, blinking rapidly to combat the tears already trying to form in my eyes. My best friend sure knew how to give a compliment. The thought of my brother made me feel a little calmer at that moment, although, it also made the moment feel bitter-sweet.

He would have been so proud of me. From just managing to keep his restaurant afloat while starting my own catering business without a clue as to whether it would work out or not, to having every table inside the restaurant occupied at any given moment and catering for the King family's gala...

"Some of the credit for my cooking skills is owed to all those times I went over to your house when we were kids and spent the whole time in the kitchen, cooking Mediterranean dishes with your mom," I giggled. "But I guess you're not wrong," I finally admitted, grinning. "After tonight's success, I think I'll be getting plenty more clients. I—" I let out a surprised laugh as an arm slinked its way around my waist and I was suddenly pulled back against a solid, warm chest.

"I think you're right," Marcus murmured, planting a kiss to the side of my face as he squeezed me tightly. I turned around in his arms, humming as he leaned down to press a quick kiss to my lips. "You did a great job tonight, Natalia," he smiled before letting go of me and sending me a wink as he began packing up the rest of the van. I would have been finished by now if I hadn't been running my mouth, but I just *had* to call Meghan the first chance I got to tell her all about how tonight had gone!

"Well," Meghan coughed before clearing her throat. "I'll be off now, seeing as you're obviously in good hands," she grumbled. "We'll talk later."

I winced at her sudden dry tone, shaking my head slightly. Meghan had never made it any secret how much she disliked Marcus. It might have a little something to do with him being my on-again-off-again boyfriend. She's never been a fan.

"Okay, bye, Meg. Thank you again for everything!"

"Always, babe," she said. When the two of us hung up, I began helping Marcus load up the rest of the van.

"Thank you for helping me out," I smiled, glancing at him as I picked up the final stack of containers. "I mean, with loading the van *and* with making sure that today ran smoothly *and* with the restaurant—"

"You know I don't mind. I love that restaurant—always have and always will—I love this business and I love you too," he told me.

He's worked as a server at June's Eatery since the restaurant was owned and operated by my brother, and he's stuck around long enough to see it become mine too. I'm sure this night meant a lot to him just as well.

Maybe for all the wrong reasons.

"So many of those high-class, rich people were impressed with the food tonight! With all the money that will start trickling in from all the wealthy people who were requesting your company info, you'll be able to move into a new house with me like we planned and have plenty left to pay someone to help your grandmother out with your niece and nephew!"

"Not this again," I mumbled under my breath, sighing as I slammed the last container down inside the back of the van.

"Come on, babe—"

"We've already talked about this, Marcus, and I'm not going to keep going over it with you," I snapped. "It's not just you and I anymore! I made a promise to Jasmine and Jayden that I'd always be there for them, and I meant it!"

"Yeah, I know," he nodded, letting out a frustrated breath. "But this way, you could get a break too! We could hire someone to help your grandmother look after them—someone to help raise them! And we could still go on with our plans of living together."

"Those kids are *my* responsibility! Not my grandmother's, and *not* some hired help's either!"

"I understand that," he cajoled, shaking his head as he rolled his eyes up toward the sky. "But you're taking it the wrong way. It's not like you'd never be able to help or anything! I just think that it's a huge responsibility, and you should live your life a bit before being saddled with kids that aren't even yours!"

His eyes widened as soon as he realized what he'd said, his words dying off and leaving us with a tense silence as we both stared at each other. He put his hands up quickly, shaking his head as I continued to glare at him. "Shit, babe, that—that didn't come out right! I didn't mean it like that! I just meant that...We're still young, you know? Kids change everything in your life and I'm just not sure if..."

"You don't think I realize that?" I questioned, my voice cold even to my ears and straining as I tried to hold myself together. Pain tightened and squeezed my chest as I tried not to look at him with nearly as much disgust as I felt for him at that moment. How could he not see how hard I'd been working and how far I'd come with the kids in the year since they'd lost their parents? And he just wanted me to throw them off onto someone else so I could skip off into the sunset with him instead of keeping their well-being and what was best for them in mind?

"You're saying it as if I haven't been looking after them for the past year now. I think I know by now just how much kids can change everything in your life, and no, this isn't how I wanted or expected things to go, but they're my responsibility now and there's no way I'm going to run off and play house with you while they need me."

"Natalia—"

"I think I left a few things behind in the kitchen," I lied, turning around to head back inside the manor. "It's getting late so you should probably head home and rest up before your shift tomorrow."

He simply scoffed, and I could hear his footsteps retreating in the opposite direction, but I didn't dare look back.

Marcus had always been a handsome man. Tall and slim, always wearing a wide and boyish grin that bore his pearly white teeth. His smooth ochre skin always reminded me of the warm, morning light in a dark forest. He was beautiful. I'd fallen for him the moment I caught sight of him almost two years ago when he first walked into the restaurant searching for a job.

But in moments like these, I often wondered what it was that I'd ever seen in him in the first place. All the handsomeness and smooth-talking in the world couldn't make him seem attractive to me after he'd said something like *that* without a second thought.

I tried to put the conversation out of my brain as I returned to the kitchen, skimming it to check for any of the kitchenware that I *knew* I hadn't left behind. Instead of finding any forgotten Tupperware bowls, though, I caught sight of a man and a woman making out as if their lives depended on it.

The two of them jumped apart as soon as they caught wind of my presence, and I sent them each an apologetic, if not awkward smile as I attempted to back out of the room again, only for the man to start speaking before I could.

They were both attractive, looking every bit as rich as all the rest of the people who'd been inside this mansion. The man was a blonde Adonis with tortoiseshell glasses, and he beamed at me as he came over, reaching a hand out for me to shake.

"Hello, it's nice to meet you. You're the caterer, aren't you? The food tonight was excellent!"

"Yes, the food service was wonderful," The woman added, clearly nervous as she side-eyed the man before sending me a smile. "My compliments to the chef! It was an amazing array of dishes that you served tonight, and I particularly enjoyed the blackened salmon!"

"Oh, thank you," I smiled. "That's an excellent choice. It's one of the more popular dishes at our restaurant. The fillet is sourced locally! You must visit one day and try the other seafood dishes—"

"I was just saying to...To my friend here that I wanted to stop by!" he nodded, all too enthusiastically. "I'd love to eat at...at..."

"June's."

"June's!" he nodded again, so hard that I thought his neck might roll right off his shoulders. "I'm sorry to say that I haven't visited before, but your food is exquisite, so I'll be sure to make the trip soon. What do you say?" he turned to look at the woman. "Maybe you should consider hiring Miss June to cater your upcoming wedding! That would go down a treat."

"Oh," she laughed him off, swatting at his chest. "I'm sure it'd be excellent service, but you know the wedding is going to be a very intimate affair. My fiancée wants it to be strictly friends and family..." she drifted off as my eyes widened, nearly bulging out of my head.

I couldn't believe my own ears! So, these two were making out in the middle of the open kitchen while she's engaged to a whole other man?!

Yikes.

"Right," I put on my best smile as I discreetly began backing away. "Well, it was lovely to meet you all, but I have to get going now. I hope to see you in the restaurant soon!"

"Wait!" the man called, jolting forward as if to grab me and keep me from moving another inch, but his hand lingered in the air between us before falling to his side. He let out a nervous chuckle, sending me a small smile. "Do you think it would be possible to..."

"Keep what you just saw to yourself?" the woman finished for him. "I think it would be best if no one else found out about..."

"Right, of course!" I nodded quickly, backing away ever-so-slowly. I don't want anything to do with whatever is going on here, and the sooner I can get away from these people, the better. "I won't say a word."

"Thank you so much," the man breathed. "We really appreciate it."

"Absolutely. I've really got to go now. Great meeting you!"

I hardly gave them the time to say anything else as I turned and rushed out of the kitchen, the doors swinging behind me as I heard their panicked whispers start up as soon as I'd left.

I was too tired from the long day to even think about it anymore after that. My feet were killing me, right along with the rest of my body, so all I wanted was to get back to my restaurant slash home as soon as possible and get some rest before my shift tomorrow.

I closed the van's doors as I yawned and then I hopped into the driver's seat and let out a quiet sigh as I pushed the keys into the ignition and put my seatbelt on. I gave myself a few moments to rest, my head hitting the back of my seat with a quiet thud as I closed my eyes.

I fingered the small bracelet on my wrist as I so often did in moments like this, a soft smile wavering on my lips as I stroked the thin chain, plaited strands of silver and gold, the small words engraved on it...

The bond between a brother and sister knows no distance.

Who would have known that this gift would have such a profound meaning? It was one of the last that he ever gave to me...

"I hope this still applies, bro," I mumbled, wiping away an escaped tear.

The overwhelming pain that his death had caused had eased, at least enough that I could function again. Not that I had much choice. The gaping hole, however--the feeling of being split apart and only half rebuilt--was as strong as ever. I wouldn't ever be whole again.

Some days, the only thing that kept me putting one foot in front of the other was the children under my care who were even more lost than I was. And my grandmother, who kept us all together and surrounded us all with her love and devotion.

"Not tonight, Natalia," I reminded myself as I wiped away another tear. Tonight was a night for celebration and happy tears only. The restaurant was thriving again, and the catering business had finally found its legs. Tonight was a good night.

The drive home wasn't the longest. I spent the entirety of it longing for the moment that I'd finish unloading the items in the back of the van into the basement *and* finally get to climb up the restaurant steps to head up to the apartment that sits atop it, which I shared with my grandmother, niece, and nephew.

After parking the van, I hopped out, yawning and pinching the bridge of my nose to chase the sleepiness away as I opened the back doors.

I jumped back, letting out a scream as I caught sight of some unknown man lying inside the back of the van, amidst the tupperware.

Chapter 2. Chandler

Couldn't they have chosen an indoor event? It's not like we're lacking in space.

My grip tightened on the bedsheets as I heaved a heavy sigh. Despite the closed windows, the music still drifted from the garden below. My family's estate—*my* estate now—had thrown its elegant doors open to the city's elite for the evening. Everyone looked forward to the lavish events that allowed them to marvel at the impressive manor.

Meanwhile, I want to leave.

A knock jerked me out of my thoughts, and I perked up, thinking that it was William. When the door opened, however, I practically deflated as I caught sight of long, scantily clad legs. Realizing that it was only Liza, my fiancée, I quickly squeezed my eyes shut and feigned sleep.

"Chandler, baby," she called as she strutted inside, her high heels clacking loudly against the tiled floor. She let out a quiet sigh-turned-giggle before I felt the bed dipping as she sat down beside me. "Chandler, please, I know you aren't asleep."

She leaned down and pressed a lingering kiss to my lips, and I remained perfectly still, hoping that she'd think that I really was asleep. No such luck.

"Come on. You've already missed most of the party. Are you sure you don't want to at least show your face before everyone leaves? Hosting the gala for your family's foundation is tradition! I really think you should be down there. You're the King, after all."

Giving up on my act, I sighed heavily, opening my eyes to look at her.

Three years ago, I wouldn't have had to be persuaded to attend a party. I would have been down in the garden with our guests, mingling and getting to know the single women better and relishing the rich bachelor playboy lifestyle. I used to eat up the attention from the tabloids and embrace the carefree lifestyle that I loved so much. I was Chandler King, sole heir to the King fortune. I had everything that I could have wanted right at my fingertips.

And now look at me.

Thirty years old and barely able to get out of bed.

"I don't feel like partying right now, Liza," what an understatement. The Chandler from three years ago never would have uttered those words, but I guess this is just another example of how I'm only a shell of the man that I used to be.

"I know it's hard, but you can't just shut yourself away like this. You're wasting away in this suite. What would your parents think? It's their legacy being honored and celebrated tonight!" she huffed, staring at me as if I was the most selfish man in the world.

My eyes narrowed as I looked at her. We both knew that she could care less about my parents' honor, so who was she to lecture me about it?

"I don't need a special night to remember my parents, Liza," I growled, anger suffusing the disjointed words. "And I don't need to be gawked at by a room full of people either!"

"No one's gawking at you, Chandler. They're just concerned. Especially your friends! They miss you—I miss you. I was even hoping that we could discuss some of our wedding plans tonight—"

And there it was. The real reason Liza was here trying to persuade me to leave my room.

All she wanted to do lately was talk about our wedding, meanwhile, I was wishing that it didn't have to happen at all. This time next month, I'd be a married man, and this time next year, a father. It was all planned out. By Liza, by my best friend and lawyer, Christian, and by everyone else who thought they had some sort of say in how my life should go. But not by me. *Me*, the one person who *should* have had a say, didn't.

This is mostly Christian's fault. I know he meant well, coming up with this little scheme to get my life 'back on track' but things had gone way too far, and I was sick of agonizing over wedding plans that I didn't care about in the first place.

'It makes perfect sense,' Christian had told me a million times before. *'Liza is beautiful. Liza is from a good family. Liza is head over heels for you! Liza can give you a family and therefore your family name will continue. Liza can help you enjoy life again! Liza, Liza, Liza,'* I'm sick of Liza. If Christian's cousin is so damn great, then he should marry her instead.

Hell, I barely know the woman, and I'm not interested in starting a family with a stranger. The few times we'd spent together hadn't left me with a memorable impression of her anyway. The beautiful redhead was just that; beautiful. Not a single personality trait aside from that to be found anywhere near her.

I didn't have any interest in having children in the first place, let alone in having children with a woman as cold as her. Her lack of depth left a lot to be desired.

"I don't want to hear any kind of wedding talk right now," I told her, finality present in my voice. She looked as if she wanted to argue, but she didn't. Instead, she put on her usual beautiful smile which held nothing behind it, winking cheekily as she began opening my robe.

"Fine, we'll drop the wedding talk for now. There are other things that we could get up to instead—"

"Liza," I sighed, quickly putting my hand over hers. "No thank you, I—" I didn't feel like dealing with the embarrassment that came along with me not being able to...perform...because of my condition, yet again. The doctors couldn't figure out what was wrong with me. All we knew was that my physical health had been in decline for the past couple of years. Now I hardly have any energy, I couldn't get around without a wheelchair, I couldn't talk without slurring my words, and...I hadn't been able to get up an erection since the mysterious illness had struck either. "I'm just not in the mood," I told her instead.

She did a poor job of hiding the annoyance on her face, but even still, she sent me another perfectly practiced smile. “That’s okay, Chandler...I can’t wait to be your wife. Maybe it *would* be nice for us to wait until the honeymoon—”

“I don’t think that us getting married is a good idea anymore,” I told her, unable to keep my feelings to myself any longer. I just couldn’t keep pretending that I wanted this when I didn’t.

The carefully curated smile slipped off her face as if it was ice cream melted by the scorching sun, and tears rapidly gathered in her eyes as she stood up suddenly, staring at me with cold eyes and curled fists.

“I don’t want to hear you say that again, *Chandler King*,” she spat. “The invitations have already been sent out and you can’t go back on your word! If you need me, I’ll be entertaining our guests.”

She stormed out of the room too quickly for me to get another word out, and I sighed, shaking my head.

I didn’t even have the time to gather my thoughts before there was another knock on the door, a frustrated groan threatening to escape me as the door crept open again. I was relieved, however, to see that this time, it was William.

“William, finally!” I grinned at the tall black man as he came inside. William had been my caregiver ever since I’d first started dealing with my illness, and he was one of the only people who worked in this mansion that didn’t drive me up the wall. “Thank God! Liza was just in here going on and on about the stupid party and our stupid wedding,” I rolled my eyes. “I thought she’d never leave.”

“I saw her storming out,” William rubbed a hand over his bald head before letting out a sigh. “Sir, I know what you want me to do but I really don’t think this is a good idea. It’s much too risky and I don’t think—”

“William, *please*,” I nearly begged. “I can’t make it off this estate without your help, and I *need* to make it off this estate. I can’t go through with that wedding, and I can’t keep allowing everyone else around me to make life-changing decisions for me without my approval or consent! I know they mean well, but my illness didn’t rob me of my mental faculties. They’re planning my entire life out for me as if I have no say! Well,” I scoffed. “Let’s see them try to plan a wedding with no groom.”

“I understand your reasoning, sir, believe me, I do! And I’m happy to help in any way that I can, but...You are aware that this is only a temporary reprieve to your situation, aren’t you? In fact, this might make things worse in the long run.”

“I appreciate your help, William, and I know that I’ve put you in a tough position. I wouldn’t do that unless I truly needed to,” I sent him my sincerest look, hoping that he’d know that everything I said was true. “I *have* to get off this estate—even if only for a little while—or I *will* go crazy.”

He stared at me for a few moments, contemplating before slowly nodding his head. "If you're sure that this is what's best for you then...Come on."

"Thank you," I told him, relieved as I moved to the edge of the bed, grabbing hold of the wheelchair that William had aligned with it.

My eyes nearly burned a hole into the floor as William grabbed me under my arms and gently lifted me before lowering me onto the wheelchair.

He went to retrieve some clothes for me out of the walk-in closet. I tried my best to swallow down the oh-so-familiar burning shame that filled me as he came back and helped me change into a pair of dark jeans and a black sweater. Plus, a black cap for good measure.

I cursed my useless legs as I was treated as if I was an infant again, incapable of doing something as simple as changing my own clothes. It never seemed to get any easier. The humiliation never decreased as time went by, and the sick feeling that it left me with never went away.

Since being placed on medication without a clear diagnosis two years ago, my paralyzing condition had slowly crept over every aspect of my life, robbing me of any and all control. I hardly left the manor these days, unable to face the drastic changes that came with trying to function as a disabled person in day-to-day life.

Disabled or not, though, I wasn't going to be railroaded into Christian and Lizas' scheme.

"I've parked the van in the staff car park, near the kitchen," William told me as he crouched on the ground, sliding my boots onto my feet.

"Ah. So, we just have to make it past the foyer without being seen," I murmured aloud. "Easy!"

William raised an eyebrow as if to silently argue, but he nodded anyway. "Easy."

"Will you collect the money from my safe? Behind my mother's portrait," I told him easily. William was one of the most trustworthy men I knew, if not *the* most. I wouldn't hesitate to tell him my deepest secrets. I guess, given the current situation, it's safe to say that I have.

He carefully moved the portrait to the side and put in the combination that I told him before pulling out the large wad of cash that I had stashed away. I tucked the money behind me, glancing around to make sure that I hadn't left anything important behind as he began pushing my chair out of the room.

I caught sight of my cell phone still resting on the nightstand, but I figured it'd be best not to take it.

One less way for me to be tracked down.

We hurried through the suite, navigating past the furniture scattered around the spacious rooms. When we got to the front door, William put a finger to his lips and slowly pulled the door open. He poked his head into the hall, then quickly pushed me out.

My suite of rooms was located on the second floor of the east wing, with only the staff permeated there. Luckily, most had left for the night or were helping with the festivities downstairs. The thick plush carpet absorbed our rushed movements as we reached the elevator at the end of the hall. A recent addition to the manor, it made getting downstairs less of a marathon.

We loaded into the small unit, and William immediately pressed the down button.

The two of us were tense as we waited for the doors to open, hearts racing as we wondered whether we'd make it or not. When the elevator ground to a stop and William pushed me across the marbled foyer toward the back of the house, I got the feeling that we would. I was practically buzzing with some odd mixture of anxiety and relief.

Faint music and laughter drifted from the garden as we sped to the staff car park, stopping next to a dark-colored truck. William quickly opened the door and helped me into the back of it, and I huffed as I struggled to find a spot among what felt like a bunch of boxes.

"Where the hell did you get these wheels, William?" I complained. "What is all of this stuff?"

"It should be emp—"

"William, a word please."

The sound of Christian's voice caused us both to freeze. My eyes widened and William kept a cool façade, clearing his throat as he sent me a look of reassurance.

"I'll be right back," he muttered before disappearing from view.

I lay there, awkwardly sprawled out in a sea of containers, my breathing completely shallow as I listened intently, but no sound came from outside. I tried not to panic but my heart was already starting to race. I felt like a caged animal, being stuffed inside a cramped van, but here I was outside that manor and one short drive away from being completely off the premises, so I still felt less like a caged animal than I had in a long time.

I already couldn't imagine letting go of this feeling so soon. If Christian found us now, it would all be over, and I would never get another chance.

Adrenaline pumped throughout my system and my already strained muscles clenched in pain. Just when I was trying to figure out what to do, the doors abruptly slammed shut.

"William?" I called quietly.

I vaguely registered the driver's door opening and closing, and the vehicle shook slightly as the engine rumbled to life. Then, the truck began to move, and I felt as if I could finally breathe again.

I leaned against the side of the vehicle, closing my eyes as I let out a relieved sigh. A grin split my lips as I mentally patted myself on the back.

The gala had been the perfect time to get out of the manor, and away from my overbearing staff. I'd spent weeks planning this escape, and I knew this would be the best option. Everyone's attention was focused elsewhere, giving William and me the perfect opportunity to slip out undetected.

Even in the midst of my excitement, my eyes slid shut, fatigue creeping over me like an undetected wave in the ocean. Another symptom of my condition. Bone-deep exhaustion that was present even if I did nothing. Some days it was almost impossible to get out of bed.

I don't know how long I was sleeping, but a loud, shrill noise jolted me awake a little while later when the back doors flew open. Then a gasp came next, and I was once again bathed in darkness.

"What the hell?" I murmured groggily. "William?"

I tried to blink the sleep out of my eyes as I struggled to sit up from the containers.

The doors opened once again and instead of seeing the familiar man, a woman that I didn't recognize was standing there, looking as if she'd just caught sight of a serial killer. She let out a shriek and I squinted my eyes, trying to get my bearings and somehow make sense of it all. What in the world was happening?

"Hey! Did you hear me?" she questioned wearily. She kept her distance, and I imagine if she'd had a stick, she would've used it to poke me. "What are you doing in my truck?!"

I looked over her quickly, wondering whether I was just hallucinating or maybe having some sort of odd dream. The soft light from behind her gave her dark brown skin an ethereal glow. Long, thick locs fell around her shoulders. She was *beautiful*. But she wasn't William by any means, which was a major problem. Panic clawed at my insides as I glanced behind her, hoping to see my caregiver standing there, but he wasn't.

"Who are you? Where's William?"

Chapter 3. Natalia

My eyes narrowed at the sickly-looking intruder's slurred words, the way he struggled among the empty boxes and containers, seemingly unable to pull himself up. "Are you drunk?"

"If only," he let out a dry chuckle, grunting as he fell backward. How in the world had he even managed to make it into the back of my truck in this state?

My eyes narrowed even further. "Look, this isn't some motel. You can't just crash in the back of my van! Who are you and why are you in here—no, *how* did you get in here?"

"It's complicated."

"Alright," I gritted out. "I'll just call the police and see if they can identify you then," I reached into my back pocket to grab my phone.

"No!" he spluttered, struggling into a sitting position. The man leaned awkwardly into the dim light spilling from the alley. A pale white face, half-covered by his dark beard peered up at me. Short dark hair stood in spikes on his head, like he'd run his hand through it countless times. "Look, there seems to have been some type of mix-up. Just let me explain."

I pursed my lips, watching him carefully as he shuffled to sit on the edge of the truck.

"My name is Chandler—"

"Natalia! Natalia, is that you? I heard a scream! What's going on?!"

I gasped as I turned around just in time to see my grandmother rushing out of the backdoor with a rifle in her hands. I could tell that she'd been sleeping before as she had her nightgown on and the hair that wasn't covered by her crooked bonnet was flying all over the place. If not for the fact that she was already aiming the rifle toward Chandler, I would have laughed.

"Gran!" I stepped in front of him quickly. "Gran, put the gun down!"

"What is going on out here?! I heard you scream and thought someone might be messing with you! Who is this man in the back of your—Oh?" she'd pushed me aside and started aiming at him again before her eyes widened and she quickly put the gun down. "Wha—Natalia, what in the world are you doing with Chandler King in the back of your van?!"

"Chandler King?" my brows shot up toward my hairline. Chandler King, as in the sole heir of the prestigious King family fortune?! "You recognize him?" I turned to look at gran, surprised.

"Please," she scoffed, clearly exasperated as she shook her head at me. "I still have my magazine subscriptions. I read all about the King family in my favorite one, every other Friday! The better question is, why don't *you* recognize him? You're the one who just provided the catering for his family's annual gala tonight!"

"I heard the food was excellent," Chandler sweet-talked, still wearily eyeing gran's gun.

"I—I—" I spluttered, pulling my phone out to do a quick google search. I've seen pictures of Chandler King before, but this man didn't look anything like him!

Unless I squint my eyes and tilt my head and...

Damn. I think gran is right!

"Well, I—" I shrugged quickly as I tried to explain myself to my bemused grandmother. "How was I supposed to realize that it was him?! Look at these pictures. He looks much better online than he does in person! I—"

"Natalia!"

I winced as gran pinched me, rubbing my arm in an attempt to ease the pain as I murmured a petulant apology to Chandler, who simply sent me a pained smile.

"I still don't understand how he ended up in your truck," gran shook her head.

"Yeah, I'm not sure about that part myself," I sent him a look.

He gave us both a sheepish smile. "I'm sorry for scaring you like that. This is all one terrible mistake. You see, my caregiver placed me in here, but then he was called away. I think he mistook your truck for his."

I frowned. "Caregiver?"

"Yes," came the clipped response. "I...I normally use a wheelchair to get around."

"Why do you use a wheelchair?"

"Because he can't walk, Natalia, for goodness sake!" gran whisper-yelled.

Chandler was silent for a few moments, then he sighed. His robotic words were more stuttered when he replied. "I have some sort of illness, which affects my mobility and speech. The doctors can't figure out what it is as of right now..."

Well, him having an illness would explain a lot. The robotic speech, the way he struggled to move, why he looked so different from the pictures that I'd seen of him. He was much thinner now, and nearly unrecognizable. I guess it's clear now why there weren't any recent pictures of him. I wouldn't have gotten out much in that condition either...

"Well," I mumbled. "I apologize for being so rude, Mr. King. It's just that you scared me a little. I wasn't expecting to see you when I opened the doors of my truck."

"It's alright, and please, call me Chandler... As I said, this is all just one big mix-up. My caregiver, William put me in here thinking that this was his own van, then he had to leave for a bit and before he could get back, you had already closed the doors and driven away."

The entire situation was becoming more confusing by the minute. Why did this William guy stash him in a truck, anyway? He was Chandler King, sole heir to the King dynasty. Didn't he have a million butlers or chauffeurs to drive him around? Had he gone mad since his disappearance from the public eye? Maybe his mental health had been affected as well.

He's stowed away in the back of my van like some criminal. Screams crazy to me.

"I'm sorry to hear all that—"

"Not...Not your fault," he slurred, sending me a tired smile. "Sorry, it's been a...Difficult night. If I could just ask a favor...I need your help. I left my phone behind. Would you mind driving me to a hotel?"

"I don't know—"

"Nonsense!" gran spoke up suddenly. I looked toward her and saw her sending me a look that told me not to dare argue with her. "It's late and he needs help. He needs a place to stay and we have one. There's a spare bed down in the basement. He can sleep on that."

"But gran—"

"You've never been the kind of person to turn down someone who needs your help before," gran stated firmly. "Don't you start now. Help him down to that basement."

She turned on her heel to head back inside and I heaved a heavy sigh as I stared at her retreating figure.

I hated to admit it, but she was right.

He clearly needed help, and I was too tired to drive him to a hotel.

But then again, maybe letting a strange man stay in the basement when my gran, niece, and nephew are all staying just two flights of stairs above wasn't the brightest idea. At least he can't get to our apartment from the basement too easily since the basement isn't attached to the apartment. Plus, in his condition, I don't think he'd be able to get to us easily anyway.

"We have guns," I murmured, "This will be for one night, just until you're reunited with...?"

"William. Don't worry, he's probably already scouring the city looking for me. By morning, he'll be here. Thank you, Natalia."

Gran beamed at me, her frail hands wrapped around a steaming cup as she watched me shuffle into the kitchen and squint up at the clock.

“Morning, gran. Been to the market already?”

Lifting a wrinkled cheek for me to kiss as I passed by, she pointed to the kitchen door. “Waiting for the little ones. Jayden wants to come this morning.”

I headed straight for the carafe, inhaling the aromatic blend. After last night’s activities, and with only a few hours of sleep, my body still felt sluggish. I poured the fresh liquid into a cup and pulled the sugar from the cupboard. After adding two cubes and a splash of milk, I joined gran at the table. “It’ll do him good to get out. He spends too much time on those games.” Plus, if the kids were at the market, they wouldn’t bother Chandler.

“So, how did it go last night?” gran asked.

I forced a smile. “It went great. Everyone loved the food! The entire evening was a success—”

“You know I wasn’t asking about the gala,” she sent me a look. “Of course it was a success. I told you it would be, and I’m always right about everything,” maybe Meghan had been hanging around gran too much. Or vice versa. “I’m talking about Chandler. How is he?”

“He’s fine,” I whispered. “I guess he wasn’t lying about having an illness either...Getting him down to the basement was a bit of a struggle. I feel bad for him.”

It took us nearly twenty minutes to get him settled in the basement. He couldn’t walk without me supporting most of his weight, and he could barely take more than one step without wincing in pain. By step number ten, he was breathing so hard that I thought he was having an asthma attack. Despite all that, the man refused to admit that he was in pain.

I wasn’t exactly happy about this whole situation. A strange man—A very *rich* and *prestigious* strange man—staying down in my basement was the last thing I needed to have to deal with, but I guess I could admit that I felt for him. Whatever his illness was, living with it couldn’t be easy.

Gran’s cocoa skin crumpled, and she sighed softly as she put her coffee cup down on the table. “Bless his heart. I pray the good Lord covers him with his grace. You did the right thing, Talia. Lord knows what trouble he would have gotten himself into without you there to help him.”

I didn’t do anything. It was gran’s idea to let him stay here. If it was left up to me, he’d be staying at that hotel like he suggested.

I lifted my cup to my lips, closing my eyes as the bittersweet liquid made a heated path down my throat. My other hand tugged on one of my locs as I gave a half-hearted shrug. "His caregiver should be here soon to get him."

Before gran could respond, the kitchen door burst open, a blur of movement rushing across the floor. "Tia Talia!" the little girl was shouting before I even had the time to say anything. "Can I have pancakes for breakfast?"

I grinned down at Jasmine, shaking my head as she looked at me with her best set of puppy dog eyes. "Good morning to you, too. I've got to get to work, but gran will make you breakfast."

The little girl cheered, her braids bouncing around her shoulders as she skipped over to gran. I turned to Jayden, who'd slunk in quietly and taken a seat. "Hey, JJ. Pancakes sound good for breakfast?"

He nodded, his eyes glued to the dining table. "Sure."

I shared a concerned glance with gran, biting my lip as my heart tightened a little.

Jasmine seemed to be adjusting as well as a child possibly could after everything they'd been through, but Jayden had become quiet and reserved. Not the playful and happy child that he once was, which was understandable, but it still broke my heart.

My brother, Cameron, had owned the restaurant for almost ten years.

We'd lived upstairs with our grandmother until Cameron had met the woman who turned out to be the love of his life, Melissa. Within a year, the two of them had been married and soon after, pregnant. They'd been living with Melissa's parents while their dream home was being built.

It had never been finished.

That thought always lingered in my head. The kids were never able to enjoy the home that was being built especially for them. They would never get to have their father teach them how to ride their bikes. They would never get to continue learning Spanish, or about their Latino heritage from their mother.

There was so much unfinished business that their parents had left behind...

"Okay, listen up, rugrats," I cleared my throat, shaking my head to rid myself of my thoughts as I leveled a hard stare at my niece and nephew. "I need you guys to stay out of the basement today."

A chorus of moans and complaints immediately followed, but I held up my hands to halt them. "I'll bring out whatever toys you want to play with. You guys have the run of the living room and my bedroom, as well."

"We can play in *your* room?" Jasmine's big brown eyes widened.

I nodded. "Yeah, but only for today. *If* you promise to stay out of the basement."

My chest squeezed at the little girl's wide grin. I'd walk over hot coals to see it every day.

"We promise!" the two kids chorused, Jasmine's response loud and clear, Jayden's mumbled.

I pushed my chair back. "Okay, time to get this day started, then. I'll get the toys for you guys."

Walking toward the door, I turned back to the kids a final time. "Remember, *stay out of the basement.*"

Twin sets of big brown eyes feigned innocence. I sent them both a look, unconvinced.

"Don't you worry, I'll make sure they keep out," gran winked at me as I walked by.

I shook my head and headed down to the restaurant. I figured that I should stop off in the kitchen first and pick up some breakfast for Chandler.

At the bottom of the stairs, I turned to look toward the basement for a moment before walking through the door that led to the restaurant. As soon as I entered the kitchen, I saw Marcus standing at the large, double sinks and knew what I needed to do...

Chandler

One moment, I was fast asleep and the next, my brow was furrowing as I wondered what that annoying sound was...After a few moments, I realized that it was the sound of hushed whispers.

Still trying to shake off the fuzzy haze from sleep, I let out a low groan as I stretched the few muscles that I still had some control over.

The whispers continued and I let out another groan of annoyance, louder this time, and clearly loud enough to alarm whoever was talking because the whispers came to a sudden halt and the only sound in the room after that were a few quiet gasps.

When I opened my eyes, I immediately froze as I saw two pairs of brown eyes peering into my own.

What? Why am I dreaming of kids?

The two kids continued staring at me curiously for a few moments, and I stared at them just as well, confused. Then, the little girl grinned at me, revealing a gap where her two front teeth were supposed to be, and sent me a small wave.

“Hi!”

My frown deepened as I continued trying to make sense of it all.

My gaze slid past them as I took in the small room. Toys of all shapes and sizes littered the floor, a few drawings hung up on the wall, and cardboard boxes took up the far corner of the room. Realization dawned on me, memories from the previous night bombarding me. I was no longer trapped inside my mansion, which was great, but...Now I'm here, without my caregiver and no way to contact him as of right now. I could call Chris but that's the last thing I want to do right now...

“Oh, man,” my head flopped back onto the pillow as I let out a quiet huff.

I've gone from being stuck in my home to being stuck in a basement. With children. I hadn't even thought about the fact that Natalia could have a family here. I thought it was just her and her grandmother!

The little boy leaned closer so that his face was hovering above mine again. He tipped his head to the side and a few short plaits fell into his eyes as he stared at me.

I wasn't quite sure what to say or do. It's not like I'm totally adverse to kids, but I haven't had to spend much time around them.

Mini people, only louder and messier...Great.

"Um...Hi," I murmured. I figured that actually speaking to them would be nicer than being stared at all day, but I guess the kid didn't agree.

He held a finger up to his lips, his eyes darting toward the door before landing on me again as he shushed me. "Shh! Tia Talia told us not to disturb you! You're not disturbed, are you?" he questioned with wide eyes.

The little girl nodded quickly. "Yeah, be sure you're not disturbed!"

I couldn't help but let out a small chuckle. "No, you didn't disturb me. I'm not disturbed." As long as you don't count waking me up.

"Oh, that's okay then," he smiled a little, shuffling forward, and the little girl followed right after him.

"What's your name?" she asked. Her hair was braided, and it brushed her shoulders as she tilted her head. The two kids both shared Natalia's rich mahogany skin tone. I wondered if they were her kids. She looked a little young to have two kids, but they couldn't be that old, so who knows.

"I'm Chandler," I told them as I grabbed another pillow to prop my head up.

"Why do you talk like that?" the boy frowned. "Are you a robot? You sound like one."

A burst of laughter sputtered out of me before I could stop it, clearly startling the kids, who jumped back a little and stared at me the way someone would stare at an unfamiliar animal out in the wild. I guess, given the situation, that's exactly what I am right about now.

"No, I'm not a robot," I continued chuckling. "I have a disability."

The kids frowned, eyeing each other and shrugging after a few moments before looking at me again. I thought for a moment before deciding on a different way to word it. "Some parts of my body don't work properly. It makes it hard for me to walk and talk."

"Oh," the boy nodded, satisfied with my new answer.

I guess they didn't have any more questions because they grew quiet and started staring at me again.

I raised my brows. "If you don't mind me asking, where's Natalia?"

The little girl leaned forward and cupped her little hands around her mouth. "Tia Natalia's in the kitchen breaking up with Mr. Marcus!" she whispered.

Ah. Tia. So, she's their aunt.

"Who's that?"

"Her boyfriend."

"Really?"

"Uh-huh...Well...Not anymore, I guess," she whispered.

I grinned at the two of them. Their innocent and blunt honesty was surprisingly refreshing. Just a few minutes ago I wanted nothing more than for them to leave so I could be in peace again, but now, I can't say that I feel the same way. It's apparently very nice being around mini people. They're much less complicated than adults.

Just as I opened my mouth to ask more questions about 'Tia Natalia' and this boyfriend of hers, the basement door swung open, causing all three of us to jump. Natalia came marching down the stairs a few seconds later, her features tight with anger as she crossed her arms over her chest, glaring at the children. "Jayden and Jasmine, what did I tell you two about coming in here? We just had this conversation!"

Their heads dropped, shoulders slumping as identical pouts formed on their faces. "Sorry, tia Talia."

"Mm hm," she sent them a disbelieving look before pointing to the stairs. "Upstairs, now. Your food is ready."

"Yes, tia!" the two of them echoed as they scurried past her. The little girl—Jasmine—stopped in the doorway to send me a small wave before disappearing up the steps.

Natalia walked further into the room and sent me an apologetic look. "I'm sorry about that. This kind of doubles as a storage slash playroom for them, and I told them not to disturb you but..."

"I wasn't disturbed," I murmured, amused. I'm sure the kids would be happy to hear me say it. She nodded, her eyes scanning me briefly before landing back on my face. "How did you sleep?"

"Great. I usually struggle to sleep more than a few hours at a time, but I slept like a baby."

She eyed me warily. "Yeah, well you did have an eventful night. No wonder you were exhausted."

I nodded, forcing my eyes to look away from her own suspicious ones...

In the light of day, Natalia was a sight to behold. The deep brown of her skin seemed to reflect the soft morning light creeping around the curtains, and her beautiful eyes sparkled in the sunlight just as well.

She flicked her thick plaits over her shoulders. "Are you hungry? The restaurant's already up and running. Want some breakfast?"

It took me a few seconds to register what she had said as I was too preoccupied with staring at her to be concerned with anything else, but when she cleared her throat and raised a brow, I was finally jolted out of my thoughts. I shook my head jerkily, spitting out the words through clenched teeth. "I don't have much of an appetite—" but it was just then that I noticed the plate that she'd been holding in her left hand all this time, and the mouth-watering smell that was wafting through the air. Not wanting to be rude, I began nodding my head instead. "But thank you for offering! I'll eat what I can!"

She smiled as she placed the plate of food down on the bed next to me. I eyed it, sighing as I realized how badly I had to pee.

"Is something wrong?" she asked.

"No, I... It's just that I need to, ugh..." I sighed again, squeezing my eyes shut. I could feel my cheeks burning as I swallowed thickly and murmured, "I need to use the bathroom."

"Oh," when I opened my eyes, I noticed that her face had softened, and I felt the tell-tale tick begin in my jaw as my body tensed and my face heated up even more. She was already coming closer, not looking particularly bothered, but I could tell that she felt a little awkward. "No problem. I can help you..."

The oh-so-familiar feeling of humiliation was just as strong and as present as always as I moved to the end of the bed, and she bent down to slide her arms around my torso. She struggled to help me get to my feet and I felt awful for not being able to carry my own weight.

Putting one foot in front of the other and taking the few steps to get to the bathroom was even harder than it usually would be because I couldn't concentrate fully on the task at hand. Instead, I was distracted by the scent of vanilla that only grew stronger the closer I leaned into her, and the occasional words of encouragement that she would murmur in my ear as I paused, too tired to continue walking for a few moments. And the way she looked at me... Unlike most people in my everyday life, there was no pity or discomfort in her eyes.

Even while she helped me take a seat on the toilet. Although, I could hardly look at her while she did, my cheeks burning almost painfully I couldn't lift my head up until after she'd left the bathroom, closing the door behind her.

I heard her yelling about needing to take care of something back up at the restaurant, but by the time I'd finished in the bathroom, she had returned. She helped me back to the bed and I smiled as I settled onto the mattress again.

"Enjoy," she said after handing me the plate.

"Thanks," I smiled.

I don't know what I was expecting when I took the first bite, but whatever it was, it wasn't anything nearly as good as this! A deep groan rumbled out of me before I could stop it after taking a bite of the chicken. Bold flavors saturated my tongue, spices merging perfectly, my mouth watering as I hurriedly dug in for more.

"Wow, this is delicious!" I told her, watching as a pleased smile grew on her face. A very pretty smile, at that. "You owning a restaurant makes total sense!"

"Thanks. It's more of a family business," she waved me off with a quiet giggle.

"Mm," I pounced on the opening. "So you're an aunt, huh? Your niece and nephew are pretty cute," I chuckled. "How old are they?"

Her eyes dimmed slightly as she sighed almost inaudibly. "Jasmine is four and Jayden is six... They live here with my grandmother and me. My brother and sister-in-law passed away a year ago, and since then, I've been their guardian."

"Oh," I frowned. "I'm sorry. That must be a lot to deal with."

"It is," she murmured before clearing her throat. "But hey, we're managing!" she seemed to think for a few moments as she rubbed her hands down her black slacks. "Um... So, do you know how soon you'll be leaving?"

"I'll have to get into contact with William," I shook my head with a groan. "But his contact information is in a cellphone that I didn't bring along with me. I'm sure if I think on it, I'll be able to remember his number. I'll give him a call and he'll probably be here in no time!"

"Right," she narrowed her eyes slightly as she picked up the remote and turned on the tv. "Well, you just eat and then..."

The moment she turned on the TV, the voice of a newscaster filled the room.

"This just in. Reclusive billionaire, and sole heir of the King Dynasty, Chandler King, has been reported missing by family friend and lawyer Chris Jeffries."

The two of us froze. The fork in my hand clattered onto the plate and Natalia stared at the screen, her eyes widening in horror as a picture of me appeared on it.

"The case is being treated as an abduction," the report continued. "Mr. King was reportedly last seen in his bed last night, during the annual King Foundation gala which was held at the King mansion. This is believed to have made it easier for Mr. King to be secreted out of his home. This is an urgent situation, as Mr. King suffers from an unknown illness, and needs his medication, which was left in his bedroom, to regulate and provide relief to his symptoms. A relapse in this situation would be life-threatening to the reclusive billionaire. Christopher Jeffries is offering a sum of twenty million dollars to whoever has any information leading to Mr. King's whereabouts."