

A NOVEL
BY K. ALEX WALKER

THE VEGAS LIE



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The Vegas Lie

A Fake Marriage Contemporary Romance

K. Alex Walker

Sage Hill Publishing

Contents

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Books by K. Alex Walker](#)

Prologue

Most people couldn't predict the end of their lives. They didn't know the day, the hour, or the second they would cease to exist. Most weren't aware that, one day, it would all fall apart based on a single, seemingly innocent decision.

That wasn't the case for Raina Daniels.

Unlike most people, Raina was well aware that the minute she'd laid eyes on this man, he would lead to the end of her life as she knew it. And the beginning of her end, like many ends, started with a question.

"What qualifications do you think you have to 'school' an MD in genetics or biological sciences?"

She'd accepted an invitation to present at an epigenetics conference in Athens attended by a room brimming with MDs and PhDs. She'd accepted the invitation, assuming that they would be able to respect her opinion regardless of the lack of letters trailing after her name. After all, she had the background, the knowledge, the experience, and her science was sound. It was difficult to argue with science.

And most had accepted her.

In fact, all of them did.

Except one.

She cocked her head to the side, her half-filled wine glass barely balancing on her fingers, and studied this man who'd taken it upon himself to sit beside her at a near-empty hotel dinner table, for the sole purpose of pissing her off.

He wore a *pompous* linen-colored blazer, a white collared shirt, black slacks, and an expensive timepiece glistened on his wrist. His thick, dark hair

curled *pretentiously* over his forehead, highlighting an *arrogantly* attractive face and low facial hair neatly trimmed from his temples to his chin.

Then there were his eyes.

His eyes reminded her of looking down at a forest canopy from a helicopter in slowly intensifying sunlight, the evergreen tops merging toward the endless black holes he called pupils.

“I’m sorry, but did you need something?” she asked.

He raised a dark eyebrow. “Technically, I want something.”

“And that is?”

He remained silent.

Raina looked around, searching for the inverted pentagram haphazardly scrawled on the hotel’s wooden floor that had conjured him into her presence.

“You can’t argue theories with no scientific basis,” he said.

She wasn’t arguing anything. She’d been drinking wine and minding her business when the tall, green-eyed incubus appeared before her in a cloud of invisible smoke.

“I’m sorry, but who are you?”

That wicked brow shot up again. “Another mistake. If you’re here, you should know who I am.”

“Clearly, I don’t.”

“My name’s Dr. Lucas Saraci.”

She gave him a more thorough once-over. “You’re the one who kept rolling his eyes during my presentation. If I bored you that much, why didn’t you leave?”

“Don’t change the subject, Miss Daniels.”

The man had even remembered her name. He had to have been planning their fight for hours. The minute she introduced herself at her breakout session, he must have latched on, anticipating the moment he would corner her with sharp, descended canines.

“Your point of view was reductionist at best, ridiculous at worst,” he soldiered on. “Eating disorders are widely known to be primarily psychosocial. Your suggestion that there is a biological, genetic, or epigenetic basis for them is founded on old, outdated science.”

Like hell, it was.

Her nonprofit research institution released a paper on the epigenetics of eating disorders *earlier that year*.

“Do you agree that there are biological and genetic factors associated

with a person developing a mood disorder?” she asked. “You do know what a mood disorder is, right, Dr. Saraci? Anxiety? Depression?”

He looked directly into her eyes, no doubt searching to expose a weakness even she didn’t know she possessed. Instantly, she regretted not wearing a scarf.

“Miss Daniels, if that’s your rebuttal, you’ve already lost the argument,” he said. “There’s a wealth of research on the relationship between genes and the neurotransmitters responsible for mood disorders.”

“Then why is it so hard for your small mind to understand that those same neurotransmitters...you know, *brain chemicals*...might play a role in eating disorders?”

He leaned forward. “My *what?* Miss Daniels, has it ever occurred to you that maybe it would benefit you to listen to me? That my knowledge would be an asset to someone like you?”

“Someone like me?” She leaned toward him. “What’s that supposed to mean, someone like me?”

In a room filled with people she was certain he saw as otherwise “deserving” of his “intellect,” the man had sought *her* out like a missile, despite multiple opportunities to talk himself out of it during the thirty-foot jaunt it had taken him to reach her.

“Actually, Saraci, let me explain something to you,” she prefaced. “See, in your world of medicine, you pick apart human systems. You have a *dualistic* view of the mind and body, separating thoughts and feelings from blood vessels and connective tissue. It’s like you practice so much medicine, your brain,” she tapped her temple, “has no more room for science. Developing an eating disorder if a family member has had one is at least ten times greater than if there’s no family history. Women, especially Black women,” she motioned to herself, “are at an increased risk of eating disorders, but many of us believe that it *just doesn’t happen to us*, which can result in feelings of shame and reduce help-seeking behavior. And I hope I don’t have to explain how eating disorders can lead to serious consequences, like hypoglycemic *comas*. I have a chance, a real chance, to help people who’ve felt overlooked, people with real conditions who want someone to *see* them, and I’m going to take it, even if it takes parts of me. Now, would you like me to go into molecular genetics?”

He continued to stare at her.

She didn’t look away.

Animals often used staring to assert dominance, and no one could convince her this man wasn't at least fifty percent feral.

"I think...I made a mistake," he said, his voice considerably lower.

Her younger brother, O.B., often said she had a temper. Delilah, her younger sister, often said she had too much "fight" in her. But what did they expect her to do in situations such as these? Why should she allow someone to not only be dismissive but then try to actively dismiss her?

While her brother was a different story, she'd assumed her sister would understand how difficult it could sometimes be to wield a softer, feminine voice—at no one's fault but hormones and genes—in a room spilling over with leaping Adam's apples.

"I'm a mistake?" she asked.

He shook his head. "No, approaching you was."

"You're free to leave."

"Not until I figure out why you're being willfully dense about—"

Suddenly, red fluid dripped from his dark hair down the middle of his face, to his chin, and then finally onto that crisp white shirt.

Slowly, she returned her now empty wine glass to an upright position. While he didn't deserve assault by alcoholic beverage, she'd been expecting him to leave after his last series of comments. Instead, he'd eased closer. Then he'd dipped his head, no doubt to sink his fangs into the large vein in her neck.

Both siblings also said she had a tendency to be dramatic, but the man *could* be a vampire. Someone who'd been alive for hundreds of years would have undoubtedly, by now, learned the art of blending in.

She set the glass on the tabletop, guilt spreading in her stomach, and ignored the pairs of eyes now aimed in their direction.

"I'm...so sorry," she said.

He sucked on his lips. "I will say this. You have excellent taste in wine, Miss Daniels."

She unraveled a cloth napkin from a set of utensils and extended it in his direction. "I'll pay for whatever cleaning you need to get those stains out. The name's *Raina* Daniels if you need my full name for the lawsuit."

"I wouldn't waste my time and money on lawyers for something this trivial." He tucked his fingers underneath the seat of her chair, turned her to face him, dragged her closer, and tilted his head. "Go on."

"Go on, what?"

“You’re holding a napkin, and I have your wine all over my face. You made a mess, Raina Daniels.” His blood-sucking-predator eyes flickered. “Clean it up.”

After several stunned seconds, she pressed the napkin to his face and dabbed until he was dry, but red stains remained lightly visible on his skin.

“I did the best I could.” She handed him the wine-dampened cloth. “But you’ll probably need a shower to get rid of the stains.”

“I apologize for the way I approached you,” he said. “I’m man enough to admit that I was wrong.”

She clenched her jaw to prevent her mouth from falling open. An apology was the last thing she would have expected from someone like him.

“I’d like to try a different approach,” he continued. “I have reservations at a restaurant here at the hotel for later this evening. I was supposed to meet with a friend, but would you join me instead, Raina?”

There was something about the way he said her name, something about the low, rumbling timbre of his voice that made her throat go dry.

“You should keep your word,” she said. “This person might even be unstable enough to be looking forward to going out with you.”

The side of his mouth twitched. “To be honest, I’m having dinner with a colleague...who’s also an ex. Should I still go?”

“Good manners means you have to show up to your obligation.”

“What if I don’t want to be good?”

Apparently, not only the sound of her name on his lips made her throat go dry. The deepening of his voice, the sly smile on his handsome face, and the way he repeatedly sucked wine from his bottom lip? If she wasn’t mistaken, he was leaving contentious and headed toward flirtatious.

“If I’m being honest, Raina?” He used the napkin to pat the damp hair clinging to his forehead. “I did plan to keep my word until a couple of hours ago.”

“And what happened a couple of hours ago?”

“I’ll explain over dinner.”

“Dr. Saraci, what if this is your second chance with someone who’ll end up being the love of your life?”

“I’ll take my chances.”

She shoved her chair back to place a wider gap between them. “Something tells me you only want to have dinner with me to try to force me to see your point of view.”

“You’re not all the way incorrect, but convincing is not coercion.”

“Dr. Saraci, what did I do to you?” she asked. “What made you not only seek me out but walk across a room full of people *just* to annoy the hell out of me?”

He snorted. “I doubt an exorcism could get ‘the hell’ out of you.”

She stood and tried to walk off, but he grabbed her elbow and directed her back to the chair, his hold borderline tender.

“Dinner would give me a chance to explain.” He released her, one finger at a time. “See, that usually works for me. Now I’m wondering whether that’s the reason those relationships never seemed to make it off the ground.”

She frowned. “Relationships? What are you talking about?”

“What just happened between us. The banter.”

“*Banter?*”

“Yes. I’m flirting with you, Raina.”

She nearly swallowed her tongue. “That wasn’t flirting.”

“Then what would you call it?”

“You questioned my intelligence.”

He scratched the side of his head. “I didn’t mean to—”

“And you talked trash about my research. Personally, I would call it an encounter with one of the most pretentious people I’ve ever met in my life.”

“Pretentious is a strong wo—”

“I even had strong suspicions that you were a vampire.”

His mouth curved into a slow, provocative arc. “Believe it or not, Miss Daniels, I did try to leave you alone, but I love how your mind works. I love your passion for and dedication to finding answers to questions we in the medical field ignore too often. The other reason I walked over here is,” he searched her eyes, “kind of shallow.”

“Are you trying to say you find me attractive?” she asked. “Because I’m not about to be your first-class ticket onto the Chocolate Express.”

He laughed, his eyes closing as he shook his head twice, which nearly brought a smile to her face. He’d continuously wavered between Mr. Hyde and Dr. Jekyll, but a laugh like that could make a woman forget which side was supposed to be the villain.

“What I’m trying to say,” he cleared his throat, the smile still on his face, “is that the reservation’s at seven-thirty. I’ll wait for you in the lobby.”

“Dr. Saraci,” she placed her face much closer to his than she’d envisioned it in her head, “go get ready for your ex.”

Suddenly, he was lifting his gaze from her mouth, but she couldn't fault him for needing to break eye contact. She'd leaned into the man's personal space as though their "banter" had erased the fact that they'd started this entire exchange as complete strangers.

"I'm sorry, but could you repeat that?" he asked.

Her heartbeat fluttered against her sternum. "Huh?"

"Repeat."

"Repeat what?"

"What you said."

"What did I say?"

Seconds ago, they were two warring dragons from enemy factions. Now, she saw fire-breathing serpents winding and twisting around one another, creating a seal so tight that not even time could tear it apart.

She rose to her feet, her breaths growing increasingly shallow. "Look, if this person was me, I wouldn't want to be stood up. Keep your word, Dr. Saraci. You seem like the type who usually does."

He nodded. "I am."

"Then don't change that for me."

"Maybe you're worth it."

"Oh, I definitely am."

Blinking slower than molasses, he studied her through slightly narrowed eyes as he pressed the fingernail on his thumb against his teeth.

"Saraci, a night between you and this ex could end in passion. A night between us *will* end in the ER." Doctors would then have to use surgical tools, a room full of hospital staff, and a crowbar to unlock her legs from around his waist.

"That's the oddest part of it, Raina. I want to get to know you more than I've wanted to get to know anyone in my life."

"You must hate that."

"You have no idea." He took her hand, his hold even softer than before. "But I'm serious. I'm not asking to sleep with you, and I'm not asking to waste your time. I'm asking you to dinner. I want to sit across from you tonight. There's...something about you."

There was something about *him*.

Something that made her think of sweat-slicked bodies, hot tongues, and tender fingertips with as much enthusiasm as she thought of end-of-the-day hugs, forehead kisses, Christmas mornings, and the brush of his lips against

her palm.

“Dr. Saraci,” she squeezed his fingers, “have a good night.”

She walked off, knees dangerously close to buckling, and released a breath when she didn’t feel his hand on any part of her body. Still, when she reached the dining hall’s exit doors, she turned around.

Their eyes met.

Lucas Saraci was attractive in the way a moth was helpless to ignore singed wings as it fluttered to a certain death. He was obviously intelligent, and she was sure it would only take one web search to find proof of his achievements. Yet, the minute he opened his mouth, he became a savage powerful enough to tempt her into becoming a masochist.

When their eye contact grew unbearable, she continued her exit and knew, with as much certainty as she knew her own name, that she and this man would cross paths again.

However, it wouldn’t be serendipitous. They wouldn’t run into each other at a coffee shop, accidentally get into the same cab, or unknowingly share an Uber. Lucas Saraci was going to *hunt her down*.

Six Months Later Baltimore, MD

There was no scientific explanation for how these things happened. How someone could be minding his business, look up, lock eyes with a woman, and then become enchanted by said woman for an entire two-hour presentation.

After six months, Raina remained on his mind, strolling through his memories, leaving pieces of herself behind wherever she stepped. She was there whether he was teaching, working at the hospital, the clinic, or performing routine surgical procedures.

God, the woman was gorgeous, from top to bottom, and he loved her eyes past what was probably normal for someone he’d never held in his arms. Despite being closer to midnight than 11:59 pm, they were bright and expressive, full of the same passion he’d once possessed until it died at some repressed point in his adult life.

She’d assumed he was rolling his eyes. Instead, he’d had to remind

himself to look away, to blink. He'd hung onto her every word, and the part of her presentation that stood out most was what led him to approach her.

We can't think of people as mind and then body. People are mind *and* body. Their experiences are encoded in their brains, their DNA. The person beside you, behind you, in front of you...they're carrying decades of experiences that shape who they are, but not only on the outside. Those experiences also may control what genes their bodies express.

When my mother was inside my grandmother's body, she already had my egg in her ovaries. That means my grandmother's life impacts me across the spectrum, from biology to what her social environment was like during those earlier phases of her life.

You've probably heard that we're more than our accomplishments, but according to my institute's research, we're more than even the years we've walked this earth. So when someone rises above adversity, it's not only rising above what they can see. They are, in fact, fighting a battle many times two generations in the making.

By the time she was done, he was bewitched.

As much as he'd told himself not to look for her, to let what happened between them remain in the past, this latest twist of fate couldn't be blamed on him.

DELILAH DANIELS - 1ST YEAR MENACE

Dr. S, I need your help with something.

DR. LUCAS SARACI MD

Ugh.

Texts.

DELILAH DANIELS - 1ST YEAR MENACE

Admit it. You like me.

DR. LUCAS SARACI MD

I'll admit nothing.

What do you need?

When he first decided he wanted to teach at Johns Hopkins in Baltimore, he'd been less than enthused about having to teach first-year medical students with their weird combination of low self-esteem and overconfidence. But it had been a sort of hazing ritual. It didn't matter what the doctor specialized in; every new instructor had to bear, the terror of the first year.

However, he found that he *enjoyed* teaching them, primarily because it was where he found the brightest minds, their brains ripe for shaping and him, the cerebral clay artist.

Regardless, nearly every day, he'd continued to wonder whether he'd gone mad. He repaired spinal fluid leaks, reconstructed jaws and facial bones, and performed minimally invasive surgeries to help treat head and neck cancer. *Nearly every day*, he'd worried whether his talents were being wasted on fresh blood.

Until now.

Until Delilah Daniels, one of his all-time favorite students, changed the trajectory of his entire day with a single text message.

DELILAH DANIELS - 1ST YEAR MENACE

Now that I think about it, my sister's here. She dropped in for a surprise visit. She might be able to help me out instead. She's got a biochem background.

When Delilah's message popped up, he'd been scrolling through Raina's feed, reading the details from an event she recently hosted for one of her initiatives, EmpowerED Teens.

DR. LUCAS SARACI MD

Do you have more than one sister?

DELILAH DANIELS - 1ST YEAR MENACE

No.

DR. LUCAS SARACI MD

Send me your address.

DELILAH DANIELS - 1ST YEAR MENACE

You don't even know what the request is.

DR. LUCAS SARACI MD

You're a med student. It's guaranteed to be ridiculous and a waste of my time.

DELILAH DANIELS - 1ST YEAR MENACE

So, send my address?

DR. LUCAS SARACI MD

Yes.

He didn't know whether luck or fate had brought Raina's sister to his lecture hall, especially since Delilah was admitted to Johns Hopkins before he and Raina crossed paths in Athens.

Nor did he care.

"Luke?"

Curious brown eyes carefully assessed him, and dark hair cascaded over a bare peach-pale shoulder. That dark hair brushed the top of a strapless, body-hugging red dress as his dinner companion settled into the chair a server had pulled out. Then, she dismissed the server with a flick of her fingers.

He was a dick to his students. A wolf that didn't bother clothing himself with sheep's wool. Still, he supported them.

If he coddled them, they would never withstand even higher levels of arrogance from their attendings when they reached residency. Unfortunately, these days, he retained the arrogant air to protect a lie so fragile that a gentle blow could shatter it.

On the contrary, cardiothoracic surgeon Dr. Emmaline Rockledge came from a line of successful doctors. Her family history in the United States started before Ellis Island. Her mother served as The Surgeon General during the Clinton Administration, and her father spent over a decade as the director of the CDC before he retired. Even her siblings were renowned in the fields of neurosurgery and immunology. In short, Emmaline was everything he pretended to be.

"Is everything okay?" Emmaline asked. "I can't say I've ever seen you this focused on your phone."

For all intents and purposes, the woman sitting across from him was considered a great beauty. Due to both looks and status, she was desired throughout the medical community and had spent most of her tenure turning down dates and marriage proposals. However, medicine was the only thing they had in common, and he'd spent three years stuck in the trap of trying to date and marry for social standing.

Then there was Raina Daniels.

Raina's beauty radiated.

It made grown men, *accomplished physicians*, hold their breaths and stare at her from front rows and across hotel ballrooms, and then spend entirely too long planning what they would say after telling themselves not to approach her. To be this transfixed by one woman felt criminal, especially when she'd made it clear that she wasn't interested in him.

Maybe that was why he couldn't stop thinking about her; her rejection had stirred some primal urge inside him that human evolution hadn't entirely erased. That meant he needed to see her, today, in order to get it, and her, out of his system.

"Em, I have to go."

Emmaline cocked her head to the side. "You can't leave. We haven't even ordered the first course yet."

"It's an emergency."

She searched his eyes, rubbing the stem of her champagne glass between her thumb and index finger. "Luke, don't patronize me. I know you're lying."

"Maybe it's for your benefit."

"Like you'd do anything for my benefit."

During their three-year relationship, he couldn't recall not being supportive, understanding, or attentive to her needs, even during instances where his support had left him mired in shame.

"I asked you out to discuss *us*," she said. "I think we should try again."

"We didn't work before," he pointed out. "Nothing's changed."

"We did work."

"Then why aren't we together?"

"Because you never gave me an explanation for why you ended things. All you said was that the relationship wasn't going in a direction where you could see us getting married. I don't remember asking you to marry me."

"Maybe I want to get married." He rose from his chair. "Is that strange?"

"And you think I'd make a bad wife?"

"It's just the opposite. I think you'd make an excellent wife—for someone else." He removed his wallet from his jacket pocket. "Order whatever you want. I'll have them charge it to my card."

"Luke, I won't let you leave until you tell me the truth about where you're going."

They had history, so he didn't take pleasure in sharing information that could hurt her, but they weren't in a relationship and hadn't been for a while. Plus, her eyes told him she knew exactly where he was going.

"The truth is, there's a woman."

She adjusted in her chair.

"I can't stop thinking about her. We didn't even hit it off when we first met. Honestly," he smiled, "you could say it was the exact opposite."

Being a poor reader for virtually all his childhood had granted him the

trade-off of a well-developed visual cortex. Words came jumbled, but images were as clear as a piece of artwork. It was why he could see Raina sitting across from him, chewing him out, her brows narrowed above a pair of the loveliest eyes he'd ever seen.

Emmaline nibbled on her bottom lip until her lipstick lost some of its color. "What is it about her? Is she pretty?"

"Very."

"She's blonde, isn't she?"

"No."

"Then what is she?"

"Out of my league." Considering the size of his ego, that probably told Emmaline everything she needed to know about Raina's beauty. "But there's more to her than her looks, Em. There's just...something about her."

Something creative, intelligent, and spirited. Something hopelessly intoxicating.

"Are you in love with her?"

"No, I'm not."

But he wouldn't be surprised if he found himself in love with her one day. In a woman like Raina Daniels, he could lose himself, and as he fell, he would turn a blind eye to ropes, rungs, and uniformed rescue personnel.

"Luke, are you really leaving me to go see another woman?"

Seeing Raina could have been as elusive as capturing a photo of Bigfoot. He would leave to get a *glimpse* of her.

"Yes," he said.

"Then why would you agree to go out with me, knowing you have feelings for someone else?"

Five years ago, his relationship with Emmaline began with an argument where he'd spread his ego like peanut butter on sandwich bread.

She'd been the instigator in that scenario, aware of who he was before he opened his mouth. A year into their relationship, she admitted her research into his background was why she approached him and why they ended up in bed together that same night.

She'd heard he was a prodigy.

She'd heard he started college at thirteen.

For someone his age, she'd found it impressive that he'd already written two textbooks, one on head-and-neck surgery and the other on uplifting communities through medicine. When he "joked" that he was shocked he'd

managed to write not one but *two* books because he had dyslexia as a child, she'd laughed and said, "*Whatever. There's no way you were ever retarded.*"

But he wasn't a prodigy.

At age thirteen, he'd believed he was born solely to be the world's biggest idiot. It was what he'd heard, teachers mumbling that he was "stupid," "slow," and "a complete moron," not far enough under their breaths.

He'd worked his ass off, wanting to please his parents and those same teachers, but grades didn't reflect attempts. Therefore, for him, every D and F confirmed the names they called him.

The final nail in the coffin was the night he overheard his late mother praying to Allah for forgiveness because she'd given birth to an *aptal*.

A fool.

In middle school, he'd decided that he wanted to be a doctor, but *aptallar*, fools, didn't become doctors. Of all the medical documentaries he'd watched, he never saw a single fool with an M.D. after their name.

Then, overnight, he became the man of the household when his father all but vanished. As he'd been tall for his age, and because the family had needed the extra money, he lied to get a job as a janitor at a clinic that catered to Muslim immigrants from all ethnic backgrounds.

At that clinic was a doctor who was the furthest thing from a fool. One day, that same doctor told him that so was he.

"Em, when you first invited me, I didn't know you wanted to talk about us getting back together," he said.

She rolled her eyes. "I used the word 'date.'"

"With air quotes."

"Can't seeing this woman wait until tomorrow?"

It could barely wait five more minutes.

"No. It can't."

The rest of her lipstick disappeared. "Fine, but keep your card. I don't need your money."

He started buttoning his blazer but decided to remove it in the car. Getting Raina out of his system wouldn't be easy, so he needed as little confinement as possible to make it through the purge intact.

"Well, then." He rubbed his palms together, then tossed up two fingers. "Bye, Em."

With a tip of his head, he left.

* * *

On the short drive to Delilah's condo, which was inconveniently in the same building as his, he rehearsed what he would say once he set eyes on his demon woman.

"Raina, I don't know what you did, but I need you to free me from your spell."

He grimaced.

He sounded like the annoying minor character in a fantasy romance novel.

"Raina, I'm only here to show you what you missed out on."

That was even worse.

He left his car in its garage slot and took the elevator to Delilah's floor—Delilah Daniels, a medical student who lived in a building that housed seven-figure units.

What he knew of their family came from brief internet searches, Delilah's rambling, and watching professional sports with colleagues.

Raina and Delilah's brother, O.B., was a football player and guaranteed future Hall-of-Famer. Their father, Orylin Sr., was an engineer whose firm had evolved into a billion-dollar defense, security, and advanced technology corporation. Their mother was a former Senegalese model, and Raina started modeling at age eighteen at their mother's insistence. Then, in the last twelve years, Raina had opened fitness centers, started a research nonprofit, and completed a Master's in Microbiology and Molecular Genetics.

It was an impressive family, so it was probably for the best that she wasn't interested in him. Regardless of his professional bio, he was still the man who'd risked a family member's life to keep his status as a medical paragon.

The elevator doors opened, and he stepped out, his heart racing like a Ferrari; it didn't seem to grasp that today was about purging, not proposing.

He knocked on Delilah's door and rolled up his sleeves, hands unsteady. Delilah opened the door, a smile on her face.

"You're giving me full-on David Gandy vibes right now," she said. "Where are you coming from, the theater?"

"One, I don't live far enough away from you. Two, I was on a date." It was a term he used loosely, but it did emphasize his desire to show up tonight. "Three, I don't know who David Gandy is, but I assume he's

handsome, tall, and rich.”

“You left a date? To come here?”

“Desperate times,” he continued to fiddle with his sleeves, “call for desperate measures.”

“But what if I was lying?”

“Then I’d get you kicked out of med school.”

She snickered.

He rolled his eyes.

Despite coming from the most affluent family in her cohort, Delilah was humble, friendly, and extremely likable. It was a joy to teach her and watch her medical knowledge grow and develop. To retain his ornery persona, he treated her like his number one pest, but Delilah had quickly gone from mentee to a younger sister figure.

She opened the door wider and waved him inside, and he went from adjusting his sleeves to repeatedly squeezing his hands into fists. Raina, seated on the living room sofa, turned around.

Their eyes met.

And he silently choked on his entire speech.

“Who’s your friend, Lilah?” she asked.

“Instructor, actually,” Delilah said.

Raina left the sofa and walked over. “Well, thank you for giving my sister these opportunities. They mean a lot to her, and you’re giving her access to an invaluable network that’ll be pivotal in her future career.”

He didn’t respond.

There was no way she didn’t recognize him.

“Actually, Raina, you’ve met before,” Delilah added. “At a conference in Greece. Maybe if I poured a cup of water over his head?”

The garden gnome-sized beautiful conniver knew precisely who he was, and she was mistaken if she thought he’d let her erase him from her memories before he purged her from his.

“Dr. Lucas Suh-something?” she asked. “Yeah, I remember. Awfully quiet for a man who had a lot to say in Greece.”

Finally, he found his voice. “I already apologized for that. I...didn’t see your point at the time.”

No matter what he’d said or claimed, their argument in Greece didn’t start because he had a problem with her degree or her research. It was because he’d approached her like she was any other woman when she was, in fact, *his*

woman.

Before he realized it, he was closer to her, his frame obscuring hers like a mountain range towering above a rainforest. Delilah was roughly five-foot-nine, if not taller, and their brother was six-foot-four.

So, where did Hell's Tinker Bell come from?

"Learn my last name," he said, entirely departing from everything he'd talked to himself about the entire way there. "There's no woman in this world I find more beautiful than you, Raina Daniels, and I've tried looking. Every-damn-where."

She looked away.

"You remembered me, didn't you?" he asked.

"Maybe." She shrugged. "You look different without a head soaked in red wine."

"Or you want me as much as I want you."

"Not sure if my sister mentioned it, but you're a little young for me, doc."

Delilah did mention that her sister typically dated men roughly twice her age, for reasons their family still didn't understand, when there was only an eleven-year gap between him and Raina—as if that would make a difference.

"I had dyscalculia and dyslexia growing up, and I still graduated at the top of my med school class," he informed her. "Tell me again how scared you think I am of a challenge."

"I'd break you in half," his woman hissed.

He took another step. "Then break me. You won't be whole by the time you're done."

She sneered, her attention glued to the empty wall behind his head, and this woman could, very easily, end up being his wife if she wasn't careful.

"Please don't tell me you came all the way here to see me," she said.

"I walked out on a date at the *possibility* of seeing you," he explained. "You're so breathtaking, even when I want you to shut your mouth for a second."

Her gaze snapped back to his. "Shut my *what*, now?"

"You prefer I kiss you with it open?" He tugged her toward him, needing only one hand to command her body on account of their size difference—and because Raina hadn't put up much resistance. "As I said, it's Saraci. S-A-R-A-C-I. Learn to say it and learn to spell it. It'll be yours one day...and so will I."

He released her, let Delilah know he'd see her when the spring semester

began, and left, barely making it to the elevator. There, he clutched his chest, breathing as if someone had cut off his oxygen the entire time he stood inside Delilah's condo.

His father had once told him that anything worth having was worth fighting for, and he'd applied it to achievements and academics, never considering that the saying could work for a person.

Or a relationship.

The first time he saw Raina behind that podium, he didn't undress her with his eyes. He didn't see her beneath him, naked as he moved inside her. Nothing he pictured could be misconstrued as vulgar or lewd, proving his only interest was in sleeping with her.

He did "the thing."

Saw them together.

Built a life with her in his fantasies.

Equally intrigued and terrified, he'd avoided her, but his feet had carried him across the hotel dining hall. And the moment she opened her mouth, he saw *him*—the Lucas Saraci who used to mop linoleum floors while listening to Warren G, Hootie & the Blowfish, and Green Day on his best friend's CD player.

There'd been no act, no need for arrogance or pretense. As he'd sat across from her, sat across from those angry eyebrows and those damn gorgeous eyes, he found the soul he'd lost too many years ago.

The elevator doors opened, and he burst into his unit, gasping for air as he tugged his tie from around his neck.

Demon woman, don't let me have you.

I'll never let you go.

So, please, whatever you do, don't let me have you.

Chapter One

She'd traveled to the other side of the country, to Sin City, and ran into Lucas Saraci.

Yet again.

They ran in similar circles, had similar interests. A huge biological sciences and medicine expo was being held in Las Vegas, so it made perfect sense that they might run into each other. However, something as simple as an unexpected encounter wasn't why this man would eventually bring about the end of Raina's life.

It was the lie.

The lie she told herself.

The lie she told everyone.

"Dr. Saraci, are you stalking me?" she asked, her focus on the queen and six of hearts on the red surface in front of her.

Lucas tapped his knuckles on the blackjack table, and the dealer slid two cards in his direction.

"Don't make yourself so easy to find," he said.

"I don't make myself easy to find."

"Then maybe I'm stalking you."

She looked up and wasn't surprised to find him smiling, with a slight lift of the corner of his mouth and his eyes clearly expressing how much he enjoyed driving her crazy in ways she was sure she might never be able to share.

Earlier, he'd had on a pewter-colored suit, white shirt, and dark tie. Now, the blazer and tie were gone. The top button on the shirt was undone. With the exception of the neatly trimmed hair on his face, he looked like someone

who'd spent the day being bombarded with conversations from thousands of conference attendees. Each time she'd spotted him, he'd been surrounded by a horde.

After their meeting in Greece, she'd researched who he was, and she could admit that she'd checked to see whether he would be attending the expo before booking her ticket to Nevada. However, she wasn't foolish enough to believe he'd made all those Instagram posts—*well, technically, his assistant made the posts*—about attending the conference in hopes of seeing her.

As far as anyone was concerned, she loathed this man. She certainly didn't spend too many nights lying in bed, staring at the pages of a book until the words blurred, creating images of his arms wrapped around her from behind as he nuzzled her neck. In no version of the world did this man *nuzzle*.

She waved her hand, letting the dealer know she didn't want any more cards. Lucas struck the velvet tabletop two times with the tip of his finger, and the dealer slid a third card in his direction.

They both lost.

After playing several additional rounds of blackjack, they grew tired of losing money and left the table. Lucas remained beside her, unfairly sexy with one hand casually tucked inside his pocket.

He searched the hotel casino's wide-open space, which looked golden on account of the chandeliers, overhead lights, and elaborate drapery whose pattern reminded her of her late grandmother's sofa and loveseat collection.

"So, Raina Daniels, what brought you here? I didn't see your name on the list of speakers."

"You looked for me?" she asked.

"I look for you every time I come to one of these things."

In her fantasy, his nose brushed the arch of her neck, followed by his lips and him pulling her further into the arms he'd wrapped around her.

"I'm here to network and get more buzz for our research. Possibly, a collaboration."

"That's the epigenetics research, correct?"

"Yep."

"Okay." He pointed to a collection of tables. "How about a few rounds of poker?"

She didn't respond, too busy studying the few light strands interspersed between the dark waves and swoops of his hair.

From what Delilah had shared—without her asking—she knew he was born in Turkey, but students thought he was everything from Middle Eastern to Greek. For a man with all of his letters and books and awards, he never married and had no children, and he was the result of what one article had called an “American Dream Success Story.”

“Don’t you have anything more productive to do than spending the rest of your evening with me?” she teased.

“More productive than spending time with you?” He shook his head. “No. This is my chance to get to know you better, and I want to get to know you better.”

“Honestly? I feel the same way.”

He raised an eyebrow. “You do?”

“I...might have said the quiet part out loud,” she confessed.

He grinned. “Why do you ‘feel the same way’?”

“It’s not obvious? I’m supposed to share your last name one day. What better time than the present to become more acquainted with my future husband?”

His grin transformed into a deep laugh, and she discreetly squeezed her hands into fists until her joints went ice cold; the minute the sound left his throat, she wanted to hug him, hold him. Late last year, after his declaration in her sister’s condo, she’d barely been able to see straight without the letters of his last name flashing through her mind.

“So, are we playing poker then, Mrs. Saraci?”

Too many sensations coiled in her stomach for her to identify any single one by name.

“Lucas, if I’m being honest, I think I’m ‘peopled’ out for the day.”

“I know what you mean.” He tilted his head to the side, stretching the muscles in his neck and unabashedly scanning her from head to toe. “One, I love it when you call me Lucas, and two, you look incredible. I’ve been meaning to tell you that for about eight hours now.”

All she wore was a simple silk blouse, plain olive green high-waisted dress pants, and the basic striped flats she’d stuck her feet into to walk around the giant hotel.

“Also, send me the website where you bought those pants. I want to get you a dozen. At least.”

“I don’t have your number,” she reminded him.

He retrieved his phone from his pocket. Seconds later, hers chimed in her

purse.

“You’re listed as Delilah’s emergency contact at the clinic,” he said. “I made sure to have those numbers pre-programmed in my phone in case of, you know, emergencies.”

She removed her phone and saved his number to her contacts list, but before she could put it away, he snatched it from her hand and looked at the screen, brows narrowed.

“Dr. Doom?”

“That’s what Delilah used to call you,” she said.

“I know. Sometimes, she did it to my face.”

“*Delilah*, did?” Her quiet and reserved baby sister, who she eventually learned was not as innocent as she’d once believed, had called this man a name to his face?

“She’s not as meek as people seem to think she is.” He flashed her a look. “Which makes me wonder if, despite all that fire inside you, you singe without burning.”

“I’m all fire, Dr. Saraci. All fire. Now, my phone?”

He slipped it into his pocket. “I’ll give it back to you later.”

“What if I’m waiting on an important phone call?”

“From who? Your family?”

“Or my man.”

“Why would I call you if I’m standing right next to you?”

She pressed her lips together to hide what would have been a smile more enormous than the Bellagio. “Are you always this...aggressive?”

“My approach is usually all ego,” he said. “You seem to have forgotten. You’ll find no better-looking man walking around with his foot in his mouth.”

She laughed.

His irises lit up. “Nice. I made you laugh.”

“And I heard that laughter’s a good foundation for a marriage,” she added. “We’re off to a decent start.”

Another deep, stomach-coiling chuckle thundered in his chest, which made her take a half step closer to him. The person approaching them had been nowhere close to bumping into her, but Lucas’ body heat now warmed her side.

Mission accomplished.

An easy silence passed between them, one not at all dulled by the endless

chime of slot machines, disappointed groans, excited shouts, and the low rumbling of simultaneous conversations.

“I could be wrong here,” he began, “but I wouldn’t be this way if I didn’t think you liked me to some degree. You seem like the type who wouldn’t give me this much of your time if you didn’t.”

The man was incredibly perceptive.

“What do you think I like about you?” she asked.

He gestured to his face. “Obviously, I’m handsome.”

“Obviously.”

“I’m glad you agree.”

He cleared his throat, and she caught a thread of a smile before it disappeared.

“And I think you like the same things about me as I do you—wit, energy, knowledge, and I’m extremely attracted to your intelligence and passion. After Greece, I felt...different. See, I went into medicine to help people, like so many of us fresh-faced med students, but over time, it became more about...appearance. But then the way you talked about your research awakened something I didn’t realize had died.”

Until now, her relationships had all served one purpose—distraction. Either she would agree to be a pretty face on a man’s arm or enter the relationship knowing her heart would never be placed on the line. Sometimes, she dated solely to go against her family’s expectations. In those relationships, not once did her heart beat.

Not like this.

Plus, there was the way Delilah talked about him. Right away, she’d gotten the sense that he was one of those people who built walls around their emotions and fortified them with asshole attitudes and moody, mysterious personas.

But the things he did, for her sister and the Baltimore community, reflected a different man from the one he portrayed. All she needed now was to run into a man with the last name Wickham spinning a tale of “Mr. Saraci’s” evil deeds.

“Let’s go to your hotel room,” she suggested. “We can play poker there. I’d like to win back my phone.”

He cocked his head to the side. “I won’t say no.”

“Good, because I’m hoping for a yes.”

“You must truly be ‘peopled out’ to suggest we go up to the room of your

sworn adversary.” He sighed. “But I can’t blame you. Feels like I’ve talked to over a thousand people today.”

“Does it get tiring?”

“Yes, but a single person can help even out the exhaustion of talking to dozens of people whose names you’ll never remember.” He motioned to her. “I’m referring to you, Mrs. Saraci. In case it’s unclear.”

She wagged a finger at him. “See this? This is flirting.”

He eyed her, dragging his fingers along his jaw in a gesture that shouldn’t have been as sexy as it was.

“If you’re sure you want to go up to my room, let’s go now. If not, I still want to take you to dinner.”

“We could order room service,” she said. “We’ll eat in. If I spend any more time around large groups of people, I’ll pull my hair out.”

“You could always go back to your room and go to bed.”

“I could.”

Except, she wanted to spend more time with him. The way she liked this man was probably in a psychological diagnostic manual somewhere, classified under terms related to fixation, obsession, passion, and mania.

“Be careful, Raina.” He took her hand and pulled her along, headed for the elevators. “I’m a very determined man when I want something.”

“And if we end up wanting each other?”

“I think we already do.”

She groaned. “You and that huge ego.”

“Oh, it’s much bigger than you might have imagined.” He kissed the back of her hand. “Much bigger.”

* * *

They picked up a deck of cards and poker chips on the way to his room, and she set up their game on the dining table while he took her purse and shoes to the closet.

The view outside the window momentarily distracted her—the beauty of city life and high-rises in the shadow of the setting sun. The neon landscape was romantic in its own way, colorful and vibrant, promising liveliness and sin during the hours most other cities would be fast asleep. It reminded her of a royal figure’s jewelry box, a collection of rubies and emeralds and a sky

gradually being lit like spilled diamonds on black velvet.

“So, Raina Daniels, do you have a taste for anything specific?”

She faced Lucas to respond, but he was standing across from her, shirtless, with the button on his slacks undone and a T-shirt strewn over his shoulder. He was looking down at his phone, so he couldn't see her ogling him, but if she stared any harder, he would soon feel it.

“There's Lentil Dal,” he said. “It says it comes with basmati rice and a side of naan.”

“Can you get extra naan?” she asked. “If so, get me a few extra.”

“Yes, ma'am. What about drinks? Wine? Something from the bar?”

“Bar. Tequila sunrise.”

He ordered their meals and then disappeared inside the suite's bedroom. When he reemerged, he'd changed into a T-shirt and drawstring pajama bottoms.

“Boo, not fair.” She wrinkled her nose. “I can't get comfortable.”

“Would you like a shirt?”

“And some shorts, please.”

The shirt fit like a dress, and she had to tighten the string and fold over the top of the shorts four times to prevent them from falling. By the time she was finished getting dressed, he'd completed their table setup, and their drinks had arrived.

He shuffled the cards, eyes on her. “Should we start with monetary stakes?”

“Sounds good.” She took a sip from her glass as she climbed onto a chair. “How about...twenty bucks?”

“Let's double that.”

While he dealt the cards, she watched him. He seemed different, but it didn't have solely to do with sitting across from her in casual clothing. More than once, when she looked at him, even at his pictures online, she compared each one to the man she'd first met. The man who'd assumed questioning her research and borderline questioning her intelligence was flirting.

Like this, he was more attractive than she'd ever found him, so it made little sense why he would waste time with arrogance. Had he walked over, taken the seat next to her, and then asked her to have dinner with him, she would have likely accepted.

Despite their mutual attraction, a relationship seemed unlikely, but not because she wasn't interested in one. That “something” about him resonated

like a bow on violin strings.

This man was the only one in all of her thirty years she'd ever pictured more with. With him, her fantasies didn't stop at award ceremonies or galas or end with a mutual agreement to separate that didn't put the slightest dent in her emotions.

She wanted him.

She wanted to be his, if only for a moment.

But with all his accolades and his "American Dream Success" stories, this man probably had a perfect life. That meant he expected a polished girlfriend and wife, and the expectation of flawlessness was an area she knew too well.

The perfect daughter.

The perfect sister.

The perfect image of dark-skinned beauty.

More than likely, he would spend their entire relationship trying to mold her into something she wasn't, something *he* wanted, and she'd spent too many years learning to love the woman she was to let that happen.

"All right, Mrs. Saraci." He took a sip of his whiskey sour. "Let's begin."

* * *

The game started innocently enough.

About an hour and a couple more drinks in, she found herself on her knees on the chair, bent over, her forehead pressed against the tabletop. Lucas' fingers played in the flat-ironed strands of her hair as he taunted her with words she only half heard. Between the drinks, and the fact that room service had yet to arrive with their meals, they tiptoed the line between tipsy and drunk as hell.

So far, she'd won three hundred dollars, his watch, the return of her phone, and him agreeing to sit across from her shirtless.

He won back half of the three hundred dollars, the return of his watch, and for her to agree to be his date for a physician's ball later that year. Now, her hotel room key was up for grabs.

"You have to show your hand, Mrs. Saraci."

She had a straight—six, seven, eight, nine, and ten. It was a strong hand, and one she was certain would beat whatever he was holding, but she'd agreed to the wager because she *wanted* him to have her room key. Whether

that meant a one-night stand or them sharing a bed where she would shamelessly curl into his warmth all night—perhaps even nuzzle—she didn't care.

Lucas tapped the table. "Cards, my dove."

"Fine." She raised her head, sighed, and laid her cards on the table. "A straight, my emu."

His eyes widened. "A straight? I wasn't expecting that."

"I'm better at this than I appear."

"Raina, you've been kicking my ass for the better part of an hour. On the contrary, you appear very good at this." He tapped his cards against his palm. "A straight, huh?"

"Yep. Your turn, my ostrich."

"Maybe the next thing I'll wager is a better nickname."

"What if I call you," she smoothed his tie, which had ended up around her neck at some point, "my penguin? It's distinguished."

He smiled.

Then she learned why he didn't do it more. The world wouldn't be able to handle a Lucas Saraci who smiled often. Maybe her next wager would be him agreeing to do a photoshoot with her before she retired at the end of the year.

Twelve years was enough, and she hoped her mother was satisfied. She'd gone into modeling at her mother's insistence because, as her mother had put it, the world needed to see more girls and women with her complexion.

Over the years, she'd seen Duckie Thot, Leomie Anderson, Khoudia Diop, and Lupita Nyong'o rise to become highly-circulating names in the modeling industry, both high-fashion and retail. As far as she was concerned, they would carry the mantle with grace.

"My penguin," she tapped the tip of her fingernail on the tabletop, "the room is waiting."

"Give me a better nickname," he said. "Then I'll show you my cards."

"What's the capital of Belgium?"

He frowned. "Why are you giving me a geography quiz?"

"I'm trying to gauge your level of inebriation."

"It's..." His frown deepened. "Wait, hold on. I know this. The capital of Belgium is...what are those tiny cabbages called again?"

For the next two minutes, they ran through vegetable, fruit, and starch names until they agreed that the capital was either Brussels or Artichoke, Belgium.

“Enough stalling,” she said. “Cards.”

He shook his head. “Nickname.”

“Fine. Let’s see. How about...Dr. Saraci?”

“Oh, I like that one. Makes me feel smart and accomplished.” He laid his cards on the table. “A full house, my hummingbird.”

She stared at the cards, three fives and two kings, and a tornado of relief spiraled in her stomach.

As she slapped the keycard onto his palm, she did her best to look disappointed, and he sniffed it like a crisp hundred-dollar bill before placing it with his other winnings.

“What are you going to do with my key?” she asked.

“I haven’t decided yet,” he said. “Maybe I’ll sneak in when you’re asleep.”

She leaned across the table. “And?”

“And,” he leaned forward and kissed her forehead, “rob you.”

She hiccuped a laugh. “That medical school debt’s crushing you, is it? You’ve resorted to stealing from poor, defenseless women?”

“My parakeet, you’re neither poor nor defenseless.” He brushed her forehead with another kiss. “But you are gorgeous.”

“So are you.”

“I know.”

“That works for you, huh?” She closed her eyes. “You must think I find your arrogance sexy or something.”

He remained silent.

She opened her eyes and found him staring at her, and her heart responded by galloping through an open countryside.

“Lucas?”

“Yes, Raina?”

“I’m your future wife, right?”

“Yes, you’re my future wife.”

“Then kiss your future wife.”

“I’d love to.” He kissed her nose. “Beg me first.”

She set the cards on the tabletop, left her chair, and climbed onto his lap, her legs straddling his waist. He locked his hands at her lower back, and there it was, his attraction to her. It showed on his face, as clear as a pane of glass.

“We’re very drunk,” he whispered.

She wrapped his hair around her index finger. “So drunk.”

“You never told me what it is you like about me. I know you like me. Don’t deny it.”

“I didn’t plan to.”

“So,” he kissed her collarbone, “tell me.”

Room service announced their presence.

Slowly, she left his lap.

He went to get the food while she returned to her chair and shuffled, the room buzzing with her with every turn of her head. Either those tequila sunrises were stronger than any she’d ever had, or her tolerance had drastically changed.

“Okay, it’s intermission,” he said. “We’ll eat, and then we’ll continue the game.”

She cleared out a space on the table for their plates. “What’s your next wager? I gave you a nickname, so you can’t ask for that anymore.”

He set her plate in front of her and took his seat, nearly tipping the chair over.

They clinked forks.

She dug into her lentil Dal. “Mm-hmm. That definitely hits.”

“Good?” He took a bite of his meal, garlic butter salmon with asparagus spears. “Wow. Very good.”

“Your wager, Dr. Saraci.”

“What’s off the table?”

“You mean if you can wager me into getting naked? Can I really take that off the table if I asked you to take your shirt off?”

“You didn’t need a poker game for that, though.”

“Neither do you.”

“Are you actually into me, or are you drunk and horny?”

“Both.” She swallowed another bite. “But first, what are you putting on the table? What does Lucas Saraci want from me?”

He chewed, eyes narrowed as he looked off to the side. “Do you remember what I told you in Delilah’s condo last year?”

Every single word.

“Which part?” She tore one of her naan into halves. “Do you mean the part about the S-A-R-A-C-I?”

“So, you did learn how to spell it.”

“I had to. It’ll be my last name one day.”

“One day soon,” he said.

She paused in the middle of raising the seasoned flatbread to her mouth.
“How soon?”
“Tonight, my sparrow.”

Chapter Two

This man had claimed he wanted to marry her.

In fact, he'd declared it.

Boldly.

However, like most men, he probably believed he knew what he wanted, and she would be "it" until he learned what she was really like. Perfection was the expectation, so much so that when she'd fallen short, her own family had pretended not to see her dangling at the precipice of a steep cliff until she got down to her last finger.

"Tonight," she echoed.

"Yes, tonight. Here, in Vegas. Marry me."

"Okay."

He nearly choked on asparagus. "Okay?"

"If you win, we get married." She blinked as if that would get rid of the stars she feared he could see in her eyes. "And if I win?"

"What do you want?" he asked.

"If I win...you contribute to my epigenetics research."

He nodded. "Then I believe we have a deal."

They finished their meals, opted for water instead of another round of drinks, and started up their high-stakes game. Considering the high stakes, her heart fought with her chest wall, and she played the entire hand on her knees instead of sitting on the chair.

Lucas laid his cards on the table: three sevens and two kings. "A full house, babe. Now, show me your cards."

"There's no way," she said.

"Read 'em and weep. Now," he pointed to her hand, "let's see if you'll be

Raina Daniels or Mrs. Saraci before the end of the night.”

She hesitated.

In her hands, she held the highest-ranking hand in poker, the rare Royal Flush, which would easily beat his Full House.

Yet, she hesitated.

“Saraci, wait.” She reached out and knocked over his glass of water, sending clear liquid onto the room’s hard floors.

“I’ll get it,” he said.

He went to the bathroom for an extra towel. While he was gone, she swapped out the cards and stuck her original hand onto the bottom of the deck, the maneuver done by the time he returned.

Once he finished wiping up the water, he rejoined her. Then, swallowing, she lowered her cards to the table—a seven, a four, a king, a three, and a ten.

Otherwise known as nothing at all.

“This is a bad idea,” he said, staring at the cards. “Rai, I need you to tell me this is a bad idea. We can’t do this. We shouldn’t. What exactly did they put in those whiskey sours that I can’t think of the glaring reason not to do this?”

Sober or not, she couldn’t back out now. Not when he called her Rai like he’d been calling her Rai for years.

“We’ll need rings,” she said.

A light flickered in his eyes. Then he grinned, and she was now confident that this man was at least fifty percent feral.

“Real rings,” he added. “I’m not about to give you a ring from a claw machine that came in a plastic bubble.”

“I want to wear a dress.”

He glanced at the time. “It’s not *that* late. We should be able to find a jeweler that’s still open and somewhere we can find a dress you like.”

“Actually, I have one I might be able to use.”

“Meet me in the lobby?”

“Thirty minutes.”

She sprinted to her room, took a quick shower, put a few barrel curls in her hair, touched up her makeup, and changed into an off-white satin dress and nude pumps. Then she found him in the lobby, fresh-faced and wearing a black and white suit with a gray, white, and blue striped tie.

“Still think this is a bad idea?” he asked.

She took his hand. “A terrible idea.”

“Me too. Ready?”

“As I’ll ever be to make a bad decision.”

They found a jeweler, bought the rings, and agreed on a chapel within walking distance.

A bachelorette party burst through the chapel door, ten women laughing and giggling as they hurried down the front walk. As they passed, the scent of rum lifted into the air like steam. The one wearing an “I’m the bride” T-shirt grabbed Raina’s hand.

“Do it, girl! We just did.”

The entire party raised their hands.

“All of you?” Raina reread the girl’s shirt. “Uh...congratulations?”

“Oh, I’m not married yet. My fiancé is at his bachelor party at the casino, but don’t worry. Vegas marriages aren’t legally binding!”

Lucas started to respond, but Raina slid her fingers between his and squeezed. The group continued down the sidewalk like a flock of geese, yelling, screaming, and comparing rings.

“Think that was a sign?” he asked. “Maybe that’s how we look. Maybe we look like them.”

“I don’t know.” She watched as the group disappeared into the shadows. “I think we’re probably a bit less levelheaded.”

After all, they were standing outside a chapel, in Vegas, after he’d won a marriage through an alcohol-induced game of poker. Then they’d signed an online prenup offered on the chapel’s website, one of their requirements for a marriage to be performed in under five hours.

“Let’s flip a coin.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a poker chip. “This side will be heads,” he flipped it over, “and this side will be tails.”

“Lucas, it’s the same on both sides.”

He smiled. “I know.”

She returned the smile. “Okay, then. Heads, we go in.”

* * *

They entered the chapel, her stumbling in her heels until Lucas had to carry her down the aisle. While he carried her, he hit the side of his leg into a wooden bench seat so hard, it would probably be blue-black in the morning.

Once in front of the officiant, he set her down. Grinning, they held hands

while a woman dressed as Princess Fiona from the movie Shrek performed the ceremony.

Twice, they had to stop for her to hurry to the restroom to throw up, and her throwing up made it less awkward when, instead of kissing his bride, Lucas kissed her cheek and forehead.

Fiona declared them husband and wife.

On the way out, with her riding piggyback, they wished Fiona a long and healthy marriage with Shrek.

Lucas carried her all the way back to the hotel and went straight to her room, where he unlocked the door with his keycard winnings. Rather than set her on the floor, he sat her on the bed and kneeled to remove her shoes.

Staring at the top of his head made her want to kiss him, but to spare him her curry-spiced vomit breath, she controlled her urges.

He unzipped her dress.

She unbuttoned his shirt.

Afterward, they stood in front of each other, her in a bra and panties and him wearing a pair of dark blue boxer briefs.

“I’ll go,” she motioned to her mouth, “get this situation...situated.”

When she was done, she found him sitting on the bed wearing the shorts she’d borrowed.

He motioned for her to come to him.

She’d been expecting him to take off her bra and then, with a breast in his mouth, slide off her panties. Instead, he draped his shirt over her shoulders, buttoned it up to the second to last button, and dragged her into bed, laying her on top of him.

“We did a stupid thing,” she whispered.

He stroked her back. “Drunk people do stupid things sometimes. The bonus is that we probably won’t remember any of this in the morning. Because at no point did we sober up and marry each other for real...right?”

“Right.” She nodded. “At no point did we do that.”

Chapter Three

Raina woke up to the rise and fall of Lucas' chest, one of his arms draped around her, and the side of her face pressed against his bare skin. With the way she was positioned, he couldn't see her face, so she pretended to be asleep to take advantage of these quiet moments in his arms.

He felt good.

Smelled amazing.

At one point, he even pulled her closer and made a low noise, a sort of moaning grunt, as he held her against his body.

This man was Hades incarnate, but it wasn't until she woke up in his arms, in her hotel suite, to him stroking her hair, that she finally admitted to herself that she secretly aspired to be his Persephone.

"I know you're awake," he said, his voice rumbling against her eardrum. "I can feel the change in your breathing."

She eased up off his chest and stretched, her arms rising above her head. "Saraci, what are you doing in my bed?"

"Saying good morning."

It was the softest she'd ever seen him, his brows relaxed and the tight lines in his face smoother than silk. This man, as prickly as he could be, was the most handsome devil she'd ever had the pleasure of lying next to.

She yawned, using the back of her hand to cover her mouth until something cool grazed her lip. Something cool and metal on her left hand, on the finger next to her pinky.

"Saraci, please tell me we didn't."

A silver and rose-gold ring hugged her finger, simple but elegant with a clear-cut teardrop gemstone.

He raised his left hand, and on his fourth finger sat a silver band with what appeared to be a rose-gold interior, the details on his ring a perfect match to hers.

“We got married,” he said, with none of the panic or anger she would have expected, considering he’d drunk-married *her*, of all people. “You don’t remember?”

She clutched at her chest. “We got...what?”

“We were both drinking. Honestly, I don’t remember much either.” He set his hand on her hip. “But don’t worry. It’s okay. We’ll get it annulled.”

“Are you sure?”

He craned his neck to see her better. “Do you want to stay married to me?”

Yes.

I do.

Very much.

“I...don’t,” she said.

“Then we’ll get an annulment.”

“You really don’t remember anything?”

He shook his head. “I don’t. Do you?”

Of course, she did.

She remembered everything.

She remembered going to the jeweler, buying the rings. She remembered the poker game that led to them standing outside the chapel with its wooden brown exterior and sky-high turret. She clearly remembered walking into that wooden chapel and then marrying the nemesis of her life—completely sober.

The “why” continued to escape her.

She liked that he challenged her, bringing a certain fire to a potential relationship that she’d craved but never had. She loved the way he thought, the way his mind worked. Regardless, he was different from the men of her past, both in age and complexion. But he’d told her, without a hitch, that she needed to learn to spell his last name because it would one day be hers.

Who, in their right mind, did that?

And why was it so attractive?

“When do you want to file the annulment?” she asked.

His fingers dipped inside the crease at her hip. “We can do it after the conference. I present today.”

“Are you okay to present?”

“It’s after lunch. I should be fine by then. I’m not that hungover.”

“What if we didn’t worry about that right now?” she proposed. “We have time. I’ll be in the D.C. area next week for Fashion Week. I have a couple of photo shoots and a couture showcase, and I already planned to stay at Delilah’s. Let’s get everything settled then.”

“Where are the photoshoots?”

“Foggy Bottom.”

“For a designer?”

“Have you ever heard of Paola Brathwaite?”

“You must know that I haven’t.”

She held back a laugh. The man was nothing if not consistent.

“Paola’s a musician,” she explained. “A lot of musicians are branching out into fashion and makeup.”

“What is it, gowns or something?” he asked.

She could barely call the outfits lingerie. After the success of Rihanna’s Savage X Fenty line, more artists and influencers were dipping their toes into the lingerie fashion industry. Paola had gone much further than bras and panties, however.

“Sleepwear,” she half-lied. “But let’s meet up while I’m in town to get everything squared away. Let’s finish the conference and worry about everything else...later.”

He patted her hip, rolled out of bed, and stretched his arms, his back facing her. While it wasn’t unheard of for physicians to take good care of themselves, Lucas had gone past “good care.” The man was in excellent shape, lean and muscular, and she wondered whether someone like him had ever struggled with body image issues at any point in his life. For all she knew, he’d never met a struggle, image-based or otherwise, and had led an idyllic, privileged life.

He searched the floor.

She crawled to the edge of the mattress and peered over the side. “What are you looking for?”

“My clothes.”

“You’re leaving?”

He turned around. “Why do you sound like that? Like you want me to stay?”

She clasped her hands under her chin and ladled her tone with sarcasm to hide the fact that she was serious. “Please, please stay with me, Lucas. I want

you to stay, baby.”

He glared at her before scanning the rest of her body, down to the sleeves covering her arms.

“Stop it, or I’ll stay,” he warned.

“Sure, you will.”

“You’re hell-bent on being difficult.”

“How am I being difficult?”

“Order room service.” He stepped into his pants. “I want eggs, potatoes, meat, and fruit. I’m getting my stuff from my room, *all* of my stuff, and I’ll be back. I’m staying here until we fly out.”

She grabbed a pillow, sat on the bed, and held it against her midsection. “I don’t want you to stay.”

“You have an extra room.”

“Like you’re going to sleep there. Just like last night, if you stay here, you’ll crawl into bed with me.” She shook her head. “Nope. Don’t come back. I’m not trying to wake up with your arms around me. You smell like Sauvage in the morning. That scent’s going to be on me for the rest of the day.”

“Good,” he growled. “It’ll be a deterrent. A keep-away spray for the assholes who miss the ring on your finger.”

“I can take the ring off.”

“Oh, I dare you to.”

She toyed with the band.

“It won’t matter, anyway,” he said. “I only have one presentation. So, for the rest of the conference, we’ll be stuck together like two-sided tape. Keep talking, and I’ll call you up on stage and stick my tongue so far down your throat, you gag. You could smell like the epitome of ‘single woman.’ I guarantee it won’t make a difference after that.”

On the outside, she grimaced. Inside, fireworks went haywire from her midsection to the cradle of her thighs.

“Eggs, potatoes, meat, and fruit, dear wife,” he hissed.

“Fine, dear husband,” she spat.

“And make sure you order something for you. Make sure you eat.” He tugged his shirt on over his head. “I’m coming back. You better open that door.”

She gestured to the nightstand. “Why don’t you take ‘your’ key since you’re so determined?”

He went to the nightstand and snatched up the spare room key. “I’ll be back in twenty minutes.”

She rolled her eyes. “Saraci, whatever. You’re not coming back.”

“Don’t do that.”

“Do what?”

“Test me.”

He walked backward, his narrowed gaze locked with hers until his back and the closing door broke their line of sight to one another.

Sighing, she fell back on the bed and stared at the ceiling. This wouldn’t end well. For it to end amicably, they would both have to agree to sign some sort of peace treaty—or fall in love.

Either way, she liked him.

A lot.

A whole lot.

Smiling, she covered her face with the pillow to muffle a scream.

Chapter Four

She had the nerve to look surprised.

When he showed up with his bags, she'd had the nerve to look like she'd honestly been expecting him not to return.

It was like this woman hadn't heard a word he'd said, ever since they first met. He'd never been this controlled by a woman, and once she understood how big of a deal that was for him, maybe she would lower that pretty eyebrow of hers.

Lucas inwardly groaned.

Was he now the kind of man attracted to a woman's eyebrows?

Then again, he had to look at her face, which was where her eyebrows were. If he didn't, he would notice the damp droplets on the column of her neck, some dripping down into the towel wrapped around her body's generous curves. She'd wrapped her hair around her head and covered it in some kind of mesh, and a colorful shower cap dangled from her fingers.

A gentleman would have backed out.

Backed down.

Called off the bet.

But it wasn't easy to be a gentleman around Raina. It wasn't easy to pretend, and that was only one reason out of a handful that made him love being around her.

"Breakfast will be up in about fifteen minutes," she said. A droplet kissed her collarbone. "I made sure to get you your eggs, potatoes, grilled steak, and mixed tropical fruit."

He grabbed the bag that held all his toiletries and started for the bathroom, but he couldn't walk past her without yanking her toward him

using the front of the towel.

Again, it didn't take much.

As much contempt as she claimed to have for him, she never resisted coming to him. If things went his way, she wouldn't resist eventually coming *for* him, either.

"Thank you for ordering breakfast, Rai," he said. "I appreciate it."

She sucked on her bottom lip and released it so wet, he immediately let her go and disappeared inside the bathroom. If he didn't, he would suck on that bottom lip, and he wouldn't stop until she ended up in the shower with him, her back pressed against the shower wall while she attempted to scream his name around his tongue.

He showered using the coldest setting.

By the time he was done, the hotel staff had arranged their breakfast on the table in the suite's dining area. While the suite did have a second bedroom and bathroom, he'd climbed into bed with her last night, not interested in being away from her less than thirty minutes after they both said, "I do."

And she didn't argue with him.

She even came closer at one point, set her head on his chest, tossed an arm over his midsection, and sighed a happy-ish sigh. A sigh about two tiers above content.

Had she truly hated him, she would have never sighed while holding him. She would have woken up this morning and asked him to leave the room while scrambling for her phone to check the annulment requirements for the state of Nevada.

She sat at the table, her food untouched, one leg tucked under as she scrolled through her phone. When she noticed him, she looked up and smiled, and he quickly took the seat across from her to avoid peeling her out of her hoodie and leggings and setting her on his "lap."

"Coffee?" he asked. "To help with any hangover symptoms. It's not proven, but it works for some people."

"Oh, right. Hangover symptoms." She nodded. "Sure."

He filled two mugs.

She chewed on a piece of toast, back to staring at her phone.

"Must be something interesting."

She set the phone face down on the table. "Oh, it's nothing. Just some article Delilah sent me. She did a compatibility test with her and Miguel that

some website published. A website called LuxaGlam or something like that.”

Once a month, he took her sister with him to volunteer at the clinic where he unofficially began his medical career. While Delilah wouldn't do clinical rotations until her third year of medical school, he'd gotten her certified to assist with treatment orders, drawing blood, and taking vitals, and she was his scribe whenever they were short on volunteers.

On the days she worked at the clinic, Delilah always made sure they ate lunch together, and for the majority of their lunch hour, if Delilah's mouth was moving, she was talking about her fiancé.

He knew that Delilah and her fiancé, Miguel Reyes, had a friends-to-lovers type of relationship and that Miguel was one of her brother's two best friends; the other one was an international bestselling author named Carson Hollister, who was married to her brother's wife's best friend.

He knew that Miguel was from the Dominican Republic and that Delilah now preferred it “*when Miguel wears his hair on the longer side.*” Then, he was present when Miguel proposed to Delilah at the biggest game in professional football. Yet, Delilah regularly gave him a full recap of the moment.

He pretended to hate the jabbering and the company, but whenever Miguel was in town and the two of them had lunch instead, he noticed her absence.

Raina picked up her fork and poked at her breakfast skillet. “It's a ridiculous quiz. She even sent it to my brother and his wife.”

“Is there something wrong with your food?” he asked. “I can have them bring you something different. Don't eat that if you don't want it, but you have to eat something.”

“Look at you, looking out for my well-being.”

She brought a forkful to her mouth.

While he didn't know whether she was a picky eater now, he knew she'd been a picky eater in the past. Picky to the point of dangerous. That, Delilah had shared with him as well, and it was one of the reasons Raina was as dedicated to eating disorders as she was.

“It's almost as if I'm your husband or something,” he said. “Is it good?”

“Yeah.” She nodded. “It's good.”

“Good. I'm glad.”

They spent the remainder of their breakfast eating in silence.

After breakfast, Raina holed herself up in the bedroom. Since he had a

few hours to kill before his presentation, he went to the living area to review his notes.

“Over the past decade, we’ve witnessed incredible advancements in head and neck surgical techniques, from minimally invasive procedures to cutting-edge robotic-assisted surgeries. The pursuit of innovation...the pursuit of innovation...”

The words went from evenly spaced to smashed together, then eventually rearranged as his gaze drifted from the notepad to his phone on the coffee table.

He was educated.

Highly-educated.

Plus, there was no way a compatibility test, no doubt made up by a group of college interns at an agency someone had approved to be named LuxaGlam, was scientifically sound.

“The pursuit of innovation has enabled us to provide safer, more precise treatments, enhancing quality of life for patients,” he went on. “Today, I’ll be sharing exciting research findings in microvascular reton...retonsstruct...reconsconstruct...”

The letters laughed at him, jumping back and forth, changing their positions until they formed a word not even the most skillful tongue could pronounce.

Sighing, he set the notes aside and grabbed his phone, but he didn’t have to go searching LuxaGlam’s website to locate the so-called test.

DELILAH DANIELS - 1ST YEAR MENACE

You like my sister, right?

Who am I kidding? You’re basically in love with her.

See how you do on this. Text me when you start so I know to be near my phone. Anything you don’t know, I’ll help with.

<https://www.luxaglam.com/compatibilitychecker>

He checked to make sure there was no movement behind the partially open bedroom door. Then he tapped on the link, and the title alone nearly made

him back out.

Welcome To The Love Connection: Are You and Your Honey Bears or Bees?

He snorted. “That doesn’t even make sense.”

“Saraci, did you say something?” Raina yelled from the bedroom. “I heard a wayward grumble.”

“It was a neutral grumble,” he yelled back.

“Why are you neutrally grumbling? Something wrong?”

“No.”

“Um...okay. Carry on, then.”

Question 1:

What is your partner’s eye color?

The question was too easy.

Raina had dark brown eyes. There were undiscovered caves on the Yucatan Peninsula with more light than there was in her irises—unless she was pleased about something. Those dark eyes had lit up like galaxies the entire time they played poker.

Then he read the answers.

Q1: Your partner’s eye color can be described as:

- A. A Summer Sky**
 - B. An Autumn Leaf**
 - C. A Midnight Rendezvous**
 - D. A Stormy Afternoon**
 - E. A Baby Doe**
-

“What the ever-loving...”

He rubbed his face until it burned.

Of its own volition, his index finger tapped *Midnight Rendezvous*.

Question 2: How often do you and your partner show affection?

- A. All The Time
 - B. Occasionally
 - C. Rarely
 - D. Never
-

Seeing as how he and Raina had only been partners for roughly twelve hours, and they'd spent the entire night touching in some way, he tapped *All The Time*.

Question 3: Does your partner have any allergies?

- A. Yes
 - B. No
-

He frowned.

How was this supposed to work?

It wasn't like the algorithm knew whether Raina had allergies.

DR. LUCAS SARACI MD

Daniels, does your sister have allergies?

DELILAH DANIELS - 1ST YEAR MENACE

Walnuts and shellfish.

And head and neck surgeons.

DR. LUCAS SARACI MD

Ha.

Ha.

Ha.

He tapped *Yes*.

DELILAH DANIELS - 1ST YEAR MENACE

You're actually doing the quiz?!

DR. LUCAS SARACI MD

Don't you have something to study for?

DELILAH DANIELS - 1ST YEAR MENACE

Me and Miguel went down to Florida for a beach weekend. I'm allowed to take breaks, you know.

DR. LUCAS SARACI MD

Goodbye.

DELILAH DANIELS - 1ST YEAR MENACE

Hater.

Question 4: Have you and your honey discussed your long-term goals as a couple?

Technically, they had.

Raina believed they were both in agreement that there were no long-term

plans, but he didn't know what gave her that idea when he'd come dangerously close to proposing in Delilah's condo. The annulment was for her benefit, not his.

Yes.

Question 5: Do you and your partner share similar values?

They shared the same values when it came to patient care, health outcomes, and the way the human system should be treated in medicine.

Yes.

Question 6: Does hearing your partner's voice make you happy? Maybe even more than happy?

Happy was too trivial a word, further confirming who'd created the quiz. Hearing Raina's voice didn't make him happy. It made him turn his head, pay attention. It made him study her face and the movement of her lips and mouth. Rather than feel things, the sound of her voice made him do things. Made him want to do things.

Yes.

Question 7: On a scale of one to ten, how's your love life?

They hadn't even kissed.

They'd barely touched.

When they were announced as husband and wife, the most he'd done was kiss her warm cheek.

Ten.

Question 8: What word would describe your partner's personality? Check all that apply.

- A. Considerate
 - B. Optimistic
 - C. Cheerful
 - D. Confident
 - E. Friendly
 - F. Kind
 - G. Evil
 - H. Revengeful
-

He checked every box and hit submit.

A rose with peeling petals followed, one petal falling after the other as the page loaded, and he felt his manhood descend with them.

Congratulations, Lucas S.!

Your score: 30.

“But what does having thirty points mean?”

A score without an explanation didn't tell him anything. For all he knew, it could be a thirty out of one hundred. A low F wasn't how he wanted to start life with his new wife.

Another screen popped up.

Raina S. score: 30.

You're a perfect match!

Like it suddenly caught fire, he tossed the phone onto the cushion beside him. Raina's phone chimed in the bedroom, followed by a gasp so loud that it made *his* lungs rattle.

Crap.

Shit.

That damn Delilah.

He reached for his notes and stared at the pages, not a single word making it to any area in his brain responsible for comprehension.

Raina left the bedroom and headed straight for the kitchen, and he watched as she searched the refrigerator. Considering how empty it was, he

had no idea what she was searching for.

“Saraci?” She held up a glass bottle of water. “Want one?”

He cleared his throat. “Sure. Thanks.”

She walked it over to him, but she didn’t scream and dash back to the bedroom to frantically download an annulment application like he was imagining.

“When’s your presentation again?” she asked.

He opened the cap and drank like the water inside came from an enchanted spring blessed by monks. “In about three hours.”

“Do you mind if I tag along?”

“Actually, I was hoping you’d come.”

She started for the bedroom.

“It was just to prove they’re all a joke,” he called after her. “These tests and quizzes, I mean.”

She nodded. “Yeah. Same here. Lord knows you and I would never be compatible, never mind completely compatible.”

“I, uh, lied on some of the answers. That’s probably why that happened.”

“Ah, makes sense.” She continued to nod, hadn’t stopped nodding. “So, three hours?”

“Three hours.”

“Okay.”

She disappeared inside the bedroom. He released a breath, his head falling back against the sofa, and reached for his phone.

DR. LUCAS SARACI MD

Evil minion.

DELILAH DANIELS - 1ST YEAR MENACE

Light bulb!

I’m your minion?

DR. LUCAS SARACI MD

Why didn't you tell me the tests were linked?

DELILAH DANIELS - 1ST YEAR MENACE

Wuuut?

They were?

DR. LUCAS SARACI MD

I'm failing you.

DELILAH DANIELS - 1ST YEAR MENACE

I'm a second-year student now.

DR. LUCAS SARACI MD

I'll change my entire schedule to fail you.

DELILAH DANIELS - 2ND YEAR MENACE

You want to teach me again? How sweet!

Btw, I'm surprised.

Now ask me why.

He didn't.

DELILAH DANIELS - 2ND YEAR MENACE

You didn't notice Raina's typo?

I thought you'd screenshot it and put it in a frame or on a T-shirt or something.

At least get a tattoo.

Curious, he pulled back up the quiz results.

**Raina S. score: 30.
You're a perfect match!**

DR. LUCAS SARACI MD

Does your sister's middle name start with an S?

DELILAH DANIELS - 2ND YEAR MENACE

Nope.

The D and the S were directly next to each other on keyboards.

It probably *was* a typo.

Still, he found himself in the bedroom. Raina lay in the middle of the mattress, fast asleep, the hoodie gone to reveal a plain black tank top underneath, the lifted hem exposing a peek of her belly.

A book lay next to her head, the front cover slightly curled with a bookmark jutting from the middle. The cover boasted a shirtless, faceless male model wearing a white coat and a stethoscope around his neck, the stethoscope dangling way past his belly button.

Which was ridiculous.

Stethoscopes weren't that long.

"Oh." He cocked his head to the side. "I think I get it. The stethoscope's a

metaphor for a pen—”

Raina stirred.

He shut his mouth.

Living alone for the last couple of years, he'd forgotten that not everyone talked to themselves the way he did. At first, it was necessary; reading and speaking out loud was one of the first lessons he'd received from Dr. Akello about getting ahead of his dyslexia. Eventually, the practice evolved into him sharing his thoughts like someone was always around to hear them.

“Lucas?” Raina's eyes barely opened. “Come lay with me for a little bit.” She moved, creating a space for him. “Just for a little bit, baby. Okay?”

Lucas.

Baby.

Lay with me.

Death itself couldn't have forced him to refuse.

He set an alarm and climbed into bed next to her. She closed the gap between them and tossed an arm, then a leg, across his midsection.

The woman was a terrible sleeper.

The loveliest, terrible sleeper.

After taking a deep whiff of her vanilla-scented neck, he set his chin on top of her head. “Demon woman, there's something about you,” he whispered. “And now, I have you. I have you, I have you,” he kissed her forehead, “*I have you.*”

* * *

A talking flower tapped him with one of its stems. A petal brushed his cheek and hair as it peered down into his face, radiant in the golden light shining behind its head.

“Lucas, wake up.”

He opened his eyes.

Raina stood over him, wearing a silky blue blouse and another pair of the same style of pants as the ones from yesterday, these in gray. Each time she slipped into a pair of pants, he was sure the fabric rejoiced.

He certainly did.

“Did I oversleep?”

“No, I got up before you because I knew it would take longer for me to

get ready.” She pointed to the closet. “By the way, I picked out a suit and tie for you, if that’s okay. I found a tie with some gold in it, and since you have those pretty, forest-green eyes, I think it’ll look amazing on you.”

He resisted the urge to run his palm over the curves of her lower half, squeezing in particular areas of interest. While he was used to curating his own looks, he didn’t hate that she’d put his outfit together, especially after she dropped in the compliment about his eyes.

“You think I have pretty eyes?” he asked.

“Yes, I do.” She headed for the bedroom door. “Don’t go back to sleep, or you’ll really be late.”

He watched her walk away, and there was no way he could go back to sleep after watching her walk away. His eyes would force themselves open, knowing she waited for him on the other side in the valley of consciousness.

Yawning, he rolled out of bed.

Sleep tempted him to lie down, but he shook it off and went to the bathroom to freshen up. Once dressed, he went to the suite’s living area, where he found Raina skimming the notes he left on the coffee table.

“Mrs. Saraci, did you send me the link for those pants yet?”

She slowly took him in, raking her gaze down his body and threatening to make them so late, he would do his presentation next year. Microvascular surgical techniques were important, but he couldn’t for sure say that, at the moment, they were more important than her naked legs wrapped around him.

“I already have five pairs, Saraci.” She stood on the sofa and motioned for him to come closer. “I bought all the colors they had available.”

“You need more.”

The added height placed their faces nearly on the same level, and when their gazes connected, a smile tugged on the corner of her mouth before she looked away again. They were married, and yet, pulling her close and gripping a handful of her ass felt like a significant violation of boundaries.

“You’ll be there, right?” he asked.

She smoothed his collar, straightened his tie, and fixed his hair. “Yep. Right up front.”

“Make sure it’s somewhere I can see you.”

“What if I distract you?”

“That’s what I’m counting on.”

They stared, undiscussed details about their temporary nuptials dangling between them. She probably had no recollection of climbing onto his lap

during their poker game at the height of their intoxication. If he kissed her now, she would probably try to strangle him with his tie—which would only make him strip her naked, push her head down while raising her hips, and drill her into an apology.

“You’re going to be late, Dr. Saraci.”

He took her hand and massaged her palm with his thumb. “Then let’s go, Mrs. Saraci, or you won’t leave here in one piece.”

Chapter Five

Lucas spoke without a stammer or hitch, his disposition more easygoing than Raina had ever seen it as he landed jokes and flashed smiles.

Heavens, the man was gorgeous.

Keeping up with his presentation wasn't challenging because the concepts were too complicated. It was because her mind kept segueing into images of him behind her, pulling her hair and sucking her neck while he stuffed her like poultry.

Again, she wondered why arrogance had been his first choice. This man would have gotten her to agree to more than dinner. By the end of the night, she would have said, "When in Greece," as she rode him in front of his open hotel balcony doors. Hell, he'd gotten her to marry him while his blood was nothing but whiskey, lemon juice, and simple syrup.

A woman on her right sighed.

Instantly, she knew what kind of sigh it was.

"It's rare," the woman said.

Realizing she had no choice but to be roped into conversation, she gave half her attention to her seat neighbor.

"What's rare?"

"To be that smart, accomplished, and sexy?" The woman flicked her fingers in Lucas' direction. "When was the last time you encountered a man like that?"

"A few hours ago," she said.

The woman laughed.

Lucas walked to the side of the stage where she was sitting, searched until their gazes locked, and held for a moment. Then he walked back to the other

side of the platform, and her imagination created a mythical fourth hole somewhere on her body.

“Do you know him?” Raina asked.

The woman shook her head. “No, but I would love to. I didn’t exactly come here to network if you catch my drift.”

Another woman on her left turned to them. “Same here. Lucas Saraci has got to be the hottest doctor in North America. Do you know he started college before his sixteenth birthday? And I heard he has an IQ of, like, 160 or something.”

“Those aren’t the numbers I’m interested in,” the first woman said. “I’m more curious about the metric system.”

The second woman snickered. “Me, I’m partial to the imperial system in this case. You know...inches?”

While they debated how thick and long they thought her husband’s penis was, Raina stared straight ahead. Sleeping next to him had given her an inkling that the word *endowment* applied in more ways than how much money he brought the university. Yet, an inkling was all she had, so she didn’t appreciate the two thirsty MDs, based on their name tags, chatting like they were ready to go full *menage* with her man.

“Do you mind, Rai?” Lucas suddenly asked. “It’s just a quick demonstration.”

Virtually every pair of eyes in the event hall shifted in her direction, no doubt curious about who she was and why Lucas was speaking to her so casually.

Nodding, she rose and met him at the steps. He took her hand, walked to the center of the raised platform, and then turned her to face the audience, his hands on her shoulders.

“I’d like to thank my wife, my ‘Rai’ of sunshine, for helping me out today,” he said, using the same gentle voice he’d hypnotized her with that morning. “Raina, sweetheart, dinner’s on me for the next several weeks, okay?”

The room tittered with laughter.

He kissed the top of her head and then tilted it back to demonstrate a procedure using his fingers on the column of her neck. She heard little to none of it, too wrapped up in the solidness of his frame, the sensual pressure of his touch, and his warm breaths whenever he bent his head to get closer. In the middle of the demonstration, he asked if she was okay, as though

whispering it in her ear, but he was wearing a mic.

The entire room heard.

More than a few “awws” followed.

When he was done, he asked the room to give her a round of applause for “putting up” with him, gave her another top-of-the-head kiss, and escorted her to the stairs. Then he continued his presentation with the same ease when, inside her, the world had made several complete rotations.

Rather than reclaim her seat, she headed for the restroom, needing to defuse the situation in her body that Lucas had come close to detonating. Although she knew it was all for show, that level of charm could soften a cactus.

She went to the row of sinks and stared at herself in the mirror, but all she saw was Lucas behind her, stroking her neck. Instead of her face, she saw that agreeable smile and casual attitude, which almost felt like a trick. Like, the moment she fell for him, those fangs would descend.

On one hand, he claimed to want her, but he agreed to the annulment without a fight. However, granting him a quick and easy dissolution of their marriage was the best apology she could offer him for not telling him she’d sobered up by the time they made it to the chapel. After all, he wasn’t the crazy one who wanted to keep his ring on her finger.

Muffled applause sounded.

Less than a full minute later, her phone chimed.

DR. DOOM

Where’d you go?

RAINA DANIELS

Restroom.

DR. DOOM

How’d I do?

RAINA DANIELS

You were incredible. Funny, engaging, informative. I really enjoyed it.

DR. DOOM

You almost made me use one of those icons.

RAINA DANIELS

Emojis?

DR. DOOM

...are for children.

But I'm done.

I'm all yours.

She washed her hands, touched up her makeup, and left the restroom, assuming she would have to search the flock of attendees to find him, but the minute he spotted her, he headed in her direction. A few people tried to catch his ear on the way, but he declined them with an easy smile without missing a step.

“It’s your ‘Rai’ of sunshine,” she teased.

He smiled, took her hand, and kissed her palm. “How brilliant was that? I came up with it on the spot.”

“Brilliant. One might even say ‘Rai’diant.”

He laughed, weaving their fingers together. “Thank you for being my assistant. I called you up on stage to get your face out there...for the most part. The medical community can be a bit cliquish at times. I figured, why not

use my influence to further my wife's research?"

"What does 'for the most part' mean?" she asked.

"I also had to touch you. It was...like an appetizer, you could say."

She groaned. "Lucas, we're supposed to hate each other."

"I've never hated you, Rai."

"Well, we're supposed to be at odds...or something. We shouldn't be acting like last night wasn't a mistake."

All he did was shrug.

They left the main conference hall, dodging more questions and invitations to events and university departments on the way. He kept his arm around her, lulling her with the movement of his thumb along her side. As they carved a path through the attendees, a few called out that they thought "Rai of sunshine" was "the cutest nickname ever."

By the time she realized where he was leading her, they were already stepping off the elevator onto her suite's floor.

"So, you're done for the day?" she asked.

"I'm done for the remainder of the conference." He swiped her keycard, opened the door, and ushered her inside. "Like I said, I'm all yours. Want to network? I'll help with that. Feel like gambling? Then let's gamble. Maybe you want to lay poolside all afternoon. I'm hoping you lean more toward that one."

"To see me in a bikini?"

"Mm-hmm, Mrs. Saraci."

If he continued to call her that, she would hire someone to hack into the state of Nevada's website and shut down the page that listed the requirements for an annulment.

For now, she would bask in him.

Indulge in him being hers.

"Networking," she said.

He nodded. "Okay."

"And a lot of quiet time."

"Introverts unite."

She narrowed her eyebrows. "Why are you being so agreeable? I'm starting to get anxious."

He nudged her into his arms, and it didn't matter how often he pulled her toward him; she never found the strength, or will, to fight. The man looked good, smelled better, and felt wonderful, and it had been far too long since

she'd found herself trapped in a pair of arms like these.

"I'm being good because I want something."

A frisson of heat stroked her inner thigh, and she couldn't decipher whether it felt more like a fingertip or a tongue.

"I want you to have dinner with me tonight," he clarified. "I made reservations for seven-thirty."

She faked a gasp. "What, no insults to my research?"

"If it makes you feel more comfortable, I can toss in a few arrogant statements."

She laughed, wrapping her arms around him. "I'll have dinner with you, Dr. Saraci, but only because, this time, you asked nicely."

"So you're saying if I'd asked nicely the first time, I might have gotten a yes?"

"Not might. I would have had dinner with you, and you would have kissed me goodnight."

"Maybe," his lips brushed her ear, "if you begged."

Chapter Six

They networked.

Saw a couple of shows.

Explored the Vegas strip.

They even went hiking at Red Rock Canyon.

Although they didn't get the chance to go to the pool as it had remained packed the entire time, she didn't need it. Lucas slept beside her in the same bed, and she fell asleep in his arms. It didn't matter that they woke up apart; they gravitated to one another every morning.

She didn't kiss him, and there'd been no sex. Yet, it was the perfect trip.

Was.

"You're going to make us late, Saraci!" Raina stuck her feet into her sneakers, tossed a long cardigan over her belted jumpsuit, and quickly looked around the bedroom before heading out. "Saraci?"

Lucas stood in the middle of the suite, watching her with a raised eyebrow. All he had on was a dress shirt and chinos, and she still had to do a double take.

"Why are you yelling?" he asked. "I'm the one waiting for you, Mrs. 'It'll only take me five minutes to finish my hair.'"

She rolled her eyes. "Still acting like a toddler, I see."

"A toddler? You nearly threw a tantrum."

"You canceled my ride to the airport."

"Because we're riding together."

"You could have at least run it by me."

"I did."

"Yeah, *after* you canceled the ride." She wagged a finger at him. "There's

a word for what you are. I can't think of it right now, but there's a word."

She reached for her suitcase, but he stepped in front of her and grabbed the handle. The movement sent a cloud of his cologne into the air, temporarily destabilizing her.

"Try something for me, Saraci," she prefaced. "'Raina, do you need help with that?' Or how about, 'Raina, can I help you with that?' Either one will work."

He left the suite with their luggage.

She watched him go, admiring his ass in the chinos until she remembered they'd been at war all morning. Their pleasantries and niceties were always doomed to come to an end, and now, she regretted not getting a piece of him before torching their peace treaty.

She completed one more quick walkthrough of the suite before stepping into the hallway where he waited, bagless.

"Lucas, where are the bags?"

He motioned around. "Not here."

"I'm going to..." She wrapped her fingers around an imaginary neck. "Keep trying me."

"What damage do you expect to do to me? You look like you should have a house in Smurf village."

"I may be short, but I'm stacked."

He opened his mouth to respond, but then he scanned her outfit, bit down his bottom lip, and snapped it shut.

She smashed the button to call the elevator while he stood behind her, scrolling through his phone, one hand in his pocket. It was almost as if the closer it came to their flight time, the more irritable he grew.

"What are you doing now, trying to change my flight?" she quipped.

He put away the phone. "I was, but it looks like they depart around the same time."

"Why would that matter?"

"Why does it matter that our flights leave at the same time? You can answer that for yourself."

"What is it? You want to make sure we spend as much time together as possible before leaving?"

An HBCU marching band had nothing on the racket thumping in her chest. The angrier he made her, the more she wanted to sink her fingernails into the muscles in his ass and pull him so deep inside her, it hurt. If he kept

this up, her inner thighs would be home to a waterfall by the time they arrived at the airport.

He took her hand and all but yanked her inside the empty windowless box, and he didn't let go regardless of how many people joined them on the way down. At some point, she started rubbing his ring with her thumb, but the look in his eyes made her stop.

Immediately.

The elevator doors opened, and he dragged her with him, his long legs eating up so much floor that she had to triple-step to keep up.

"Saraci, slow down."

Barely breaking his stride, he scooped her up off her feet, into his arms. Too turned on to protest, she clung to shoulder.

A car waited at the curb, and the hotel staff loaded their bags inside. Lucas set her on her feet and opened the back passenger door, but it took her a moment to slide inside, her equilibrium shot from being "handled."

Then, he joined her.

Not long after, the car pulled off.

"Saraci, did I do something?" she asked.

He didn't look at her, all his attention awarded to the world outside his window, but his head moved in approximately an eighth of a head shake. When nothing else followed, she took that to be his answer.

Halfway through the ride, he remembered she existed. "What day next week do you want to meet up?" he asked.

She ran through her schedule in her head. "Friday would probably be best."

"When are you flying in?"

"That Saturday. Sunday, Delilah and I have a whole day planned, and then my week is going to be a chaotic mess."

"So we'll be in the same city for almost a week before I see you?"

Hurt pinched her side.

Apparently, she was the only one who wanted her to remain Mrs. Saraci for a bit longer. Apparently, he wanted this thing over as soon as possible.

"It's the only day I can guarantee things won't run over," she explained.

He turned his head, meeting her eyes. "I'll give you Sunday, but we're seeing each other on Monday. I'm not waiting almost a week."

"Saraci, Monday's my busiest day. And won't you be busy on Monday? You told me you'll be teaching and at the hospital later that day. That sounds

busy to me.”

“Not too busy to see you.”

She fiddled with her ring, voice hushed. “Are you that eager to be detached from me? I mean, it’s going to happen regardless. You don’t have to be so demanding about it.”

“You’re really that clueless?”

“I’m reading you like a book, Saraci.”

“Then maybe I’m not the only one who’s dyslexic.”

She slipped off the ring.

He slipped it right back on. “Don’t. I’ll hurt you.”

“Oh, really? How?”

“I think you know.”

She regretted not stashing an extra pair of panties in her purse. “Do we even have to meet up?” she asked. “Can’t everything be done virtually?”

That week could very well be the last excuse she had to see him outside of anything having to do with Delilah. They hadn’t even reached the airport yet, and she already missed him.

“Monday, Raina.”

The man would not be deterred, but they wouldn’t see each other on Monday. Her schedule didn’t care that she had to eat or sleep. The brands she would be representing during Fashion Week assumed that a sizable paycheck erased the need for both. Once she retired, she would not miss this life.

“Fine. Monday.”

They returned to silence sharper than the tip of a needle and remained silent on the way to their gates. Their gates turned out to be right next to each other, so they sat together until their groups were called.

She stood.

He rose with her.

“I’ll see you next week,” she said.

“Monday,” he reiterated.

“What is it about me that makes you want to…” She shook her head. Arguing wouldn’t do her a lick of good. This man wanted to be rid of her. Their time together obviously hadn’t resonated with him the way it resonated with her. “Okay, Saraci. Monday.”

“I’ll pick you up,” he added.

“I’ll meet you.”

“What’s the address where you’ll be?”

“What’s your address?”

His jaw tightened. “What is it about me that you...” He shook his head. “Don’t worry about it. They just called your group.”

She grabbed her stuff and headed to her gate. As she stood in line, she felt him watching her, so she looked over her shoulder to see if she was right.

Their gazes clashed.

For the first time in her life, she didn’t want to go home. She didn’t want to bask in the silence and solace of her own space after being around hundreds of people for the last several days.

It wasn’t as though he was the first man she’d ever had feelings for, but she’d never had *these* feelings. The thing about him, the one she couldn’t put her finger on, grew more significant the more time they spent together. By now, she should have been able to decipher what it was about him that made her heart beat until her head hurt.

She faced forward.

The line inched along.

Then she felt a hand on her upper arm.

Lucas pulled her out of line, turned her around, and she dropped the carry-on handle as he cradled her chin and blessed her with a kiss so soft, she thought of silk and feathers and cashmere.

Her bones dissolved.

Tremors stirred her blood.

He moved his hand to the back of her head, and she cupped both sides of his face, their heads angling. His tongue parted her lips, and hers darted out, but they touched only once before he pulled back. Then he continued to melt her with swift, gentle movements of his lips against hers, the pressure of his mouth firm enough to tilt her chin as their lips separated.

Before her eyes had a chance to open, he circled his arms around her waist and lifted her off her feet. She looped hers around his neck, squeezing so tight she didn’t know how he found the space to breathe.

“That’s the last one of those you’ll get without begging,” he grated out, breathing harder than usual. “But I was in no way, shape, or form going to let my wife get on a plane without kissing her goodbye.”

Tears knocked, but she didn’t answer. It would be days before she put herself back together, and parts of her would remain attached to his skin.

Sweet.

It was the only word to describe the way he tasted and how it felt to be

crushed by his embrace seconds after kissing him until the world spun. It didn't matter that he held her so close, she felt his heart beating against her. Every last bit of it, of him, was sweet.

"See you next week," she said, her voice as if she lived on lily pads in a Louisiana bog.

"Next week," he echoed.

"Have a safe flight, Lucas."

"You do the same. Text me when you land."

He set her on her feet.

She retrieved her carry-on, returned to the line, and set her phone down on the scanner when she reached the gate agent. It took a few tries to read the boarding pass, and she mentally wished for a delay, but the agent smiled as the scan finally went through.

Right before she disappeared down the tunnel, she looked back one more time.

Lucas was still watching her.

He waved, and she returned the gesture. Then he looked up when he heard his group being called, and as he walked off, she forced herself to continue down the tunnel. If she didn't, she would run after him, and it would be a while before North Carolina saw her again.

Chapter Seven

Lucas looked up from the digital voice recorder to check the time on his monitor screen. Monday was almost over, and Raina still hadn't returned his call or text from earlier. She wanted him to believe she was busy with work, but for all he knew, she could be dead in a ditch somewhere.

"Patient is a fifty-two-year-old Caucasian male of Eastern European descent diagnosed with Primary Sjogren's Syndrome three years ago," he continued. "Patient tried *sialendoscopy* in the past to improve saliva flow with minimal success. After discussing options with patient, patient agreed to removal of salivary gland. Performed a unilateral," he took another glance at the clock, "parotidectomy. Samples submitted to histology for biopsy. Complications: none. Patient is in post-op, alert and vitals stable. Anticipated move to standard room in twelve hours."

He stopped the recording and leaned back in his chair. When he'd demanded that he and Raina see each other today, despite her reminding him of her hectic schedule, he'd known there was a possibility he wouldn't get his way.

But waiting until Friday to see her? Especially with her staying at her sister's new place, which was less than ten minutes away from his condo?

Out of the question.

It wasn't like he'd minced his words about what he wanted or, at least, hoped for them. Yet, there were times it was as if she believed he didn't want her when, since the moment he first set eyes on her, all he'd done was want her.

Someone knocked on his office door.

A rhythmic knock.

One he always pretended to be annoyed by.

Delilah opened the door and poked her head inside. “Hey.”

“Is for horses, Daniels,” he finished.

“And rabbits.” She entered, shutting the door behind her. “Rabbits eat hay. Timothy hay, alfalfa hay—”

“I thought you were in Florida.”

She set her laptop bag on the sofa in the office’s sitting area and made her way over to his desk. “I was...last week. Plus, there’s this thing. You might have heard of it. It’s called an airplane.”

When Delilah’s medical school application reached the admissions committee at JH, he was initially fascinated; her MCAT scores were some of the most impressive he’d seen in years.

Then, the committee went over the rest of her background information. As soon as he learned who her father was, he’d assumed expensive tutors were the reason for her success. In his mind, to her, medical school was only a conquest. Something she would do to prove to her friends, parents, and social media followers that she was more than just another rich girl.

So, he quizzed her—harshly.

And she eviscerated him—verbally.

So he’d learned, quickly, that who she was on paper didn’t tell the full story about who she was as a whole.

Learning about her father had only made him admire her family more. Regardless of his wealth, Orylin Daniels Sr. had instilled the same values in his children that had allowed him to reach his level of success despite social and economic obstacles and barriers.

People like that inspired him.

For him, it would have been easy to blame the world for his failures, citing religious phobias and cultural prejudice. But Dr. Akello, his mentor and the only father figure he’d had after age thirteen, once asked him whether he was okay with believing it when people told him he couldn’t do something. If he was okay with allowing others to stop him from reaching his goals:

“Lucas, can a fish drive a car?”

Lucas frowned. “What?”

“If someone puts a fish in a car and expects it to drive, is it the fish who is the fool, or is it the person who put it there in the first place?” Dr. Akello patted him on the shoulder. “You can learn, Lucas. Learning differently doesn’t mean you can’t make a mark on the world. It simply means the world didn’t bother to make time for those who learn as you do, so you’ll have to make time for yourself and lead the way for others whose brilliance merely looks a bit different.”

“I’m busy, Daniels,” he said. “Do you want something? Is your fiancé at training camp, so you remember the rest of the world exists?”

She took a seat on his desk.

Slid right on.

Like it was nothing.

“Get down, Daniels.”

She didn’t move. “I have tea.”

“Go drink it elsewhere.”

“Not *tea* tea. I haven’t talked to you in over a week, and I haven’t seen you in longer. I missed you. Plus, we have to work on growing our sibling-in-law relationship for when you marry my sister one day.”

Unbeknownst to her, he already was her brother-in-law.

“I told you to stop doing that,” he hissed.

“Saying things about a possible future with my sister because it makes you happy?”

“Yes.”

He liked this kid.

Sometimes, she reminded him of his childhood best friend a bit too much with the way she side-stepped his snippy attitude as if she could tell it was bullshit.

From middle through high school, his best and only friend was a kid named Khalid Akello. Although they’d had the same classes, they’d barely noticed each other at first, both trained to keep their heads down, get an education, and not cause trouble, or else they would be seen as ungrateful for their family’s sacrifices.

Then, he started working at the clinic. Not long after, Khalid’s father, the primary physician at the clinic, taught him that a learning disability didn’t automatically disqualify him from reaching the goals he hoped to attain. Dr. A had shared that he himself didn’t speak until he was five and didn’t learn to read or write his name until years after his peers.

One evening, Khalid came to the clinic to see his father, who’d been busy

with a patient at the time. In those thirty minutes, the two of them learned that they shared nearly identical backgrounds, although they were from different countries. They also shared the same birthday, and both had known little to nothing about American culture in the United States.

From that evening on, they spent nearly every day together, burning CDs, swapping playlists, and creating future lives with different actresses: he was a renowned physician with two kids with Janet Jackson. Khalid and Sandra Bullock didn't have kids but traveled the world together in their private jet.

Eventually, they changed how they talked and dressed and wouldn't be caught dead listening to what they'd referred to as "old people, parent music." They erased their accents, their folks became "Mom" and "Dad," and they even started referring to their respective home countries as "that place where my *parents* were born."

Khalid's family emigrated from Uganda and had been in the States for nearly the same amount of time, to the day, as his family. Like him, Khalid also had four siblings, one of whom turned out to be his crush—Khalid's twin sister, Khadijah. Then he learned that Khalid had a crush on his sister, Marianne, who was a little under a year younger than them.

As his parents had always aspired to move to the States, he and his siblings had names like Lucas, Marianne, Jennifer, Jonathan, and Brittany. Khalid's siblings were Khadijah, Aafiyah, Damilola, and Olabisi. However, the five of them eventually started going by Kyle, Kady, Fae, Lola, and Abbie everywhere except at home.

The plan had been for him to go to senior prom with "Kady" and for Khalid to go with Marianne. Then, they would attend the same university, open a medical practice and biotech firm, and become brothers through marriage.

Things didn't exactly go as planned.

Like Khalid, Delilah knew what boundaries to push, though not because she was trying to be disrespectful. She basically could sense how hard it could sometimes be for him to open up.

He placed the recorder in a drawer in his desk. "Daniels, what's the 'tea' since you're being persistent?"

"Do you remember the friend I told you about?" she asked. "Oliver?"

Oliver Samson attended medical school at George Washington and was one year ahead of Delilah. For a while, Oliver was Delilah's only friend in the area during her first year in Baltimore. They initially met while she was

on vacation in Mexico the summer after she graduated from Duke, and then they ran into each other again at a club in D.C. called Insight, where Oliver worked as a bouncer.

“Of course, I don’t,” he said.

“Well, I heard from him.”

“I’m not sure why I should care.”

Except he did.

When he found out that Oliver broke Delilah’s heart, he wanted to take a scalpel to Oliver’s spinal cord.

“Remember I told you he asked that one girl, Yasmine, out?” she continued. “Yasmine Kohler?”

He never forgot her telling him Oliver had claimed that Miguel and Yasmine getting together would have made more sense than her and Miguel. As Oliver had put it, Yasmine was a “fifteen out of ten,” and Miguel was too good-looking to be genuinely interested in a “cute nerd” like Delilah.

“At what point will you get to the point, Daniels?” he asked. “You must realize I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

She grabbed a mini package of Skittles from the candy dish he started keeping on his desk, even though he didn’t like candy.

“Well, Yasmine and Oliver did end up dating for a little while, for about five months. But then get this...Yasmine left him for his *sister*.”

He frowned. “Isn’t his sister in a relationship? With a man?”

Delilah’s eyes lit up. “You do listen to me!”

“Barely.”

“Yes, his sister is.”

“How bad of a boyfriend was he that Yas—that the girl left him to join an already established relationship?”

“Yasmine has a boyfriend now.”

“So, she lied to get away from him?”

Good for Yasmine. Oliver deserved to be alone—or six feet under.

“Okay, so I have a theory.” Delilah popped a couple of Skittles into her mouth, pointing at him as she chewed. “Knowing Oliver, I think he was probably so scared about messing up with Yasmine, his ‘goodness’ made him a terrible boyfriend. The way he explained it to me was if Yasmine said she wanted A, he would get her A-squared. Whenever she complained, he’d remind her she was ‘too beautiful’ to truly need to worry about anything. And she had severe anxiety about clinical rotations, but he told her it didn’t matter

because he would do great, graduate medical school, and then make a lot of money to take care of her. Textbook minimization.”

Served the asshole right.

The guy had all but said Delilah wasn't good enough for Miguel. Had he already been married to Raina at the time, maybe he would have tracked Oliver Samson down for fucking with his family.

“So he called you seeking comfort?” he asked.

She shook her head. “No, to apologize. He said he saw the game where Miguel proposed, and he thought back to what he told me and saw how messed up it was. He wants us to be friends again.”

Over his dead body.

“Absolutely not.”

She rolled her eyes. “You sound like Miguel...and my brother...and Raina.”

His ears perked up. “Raina doesn't like him?”

“You'd have an easier time counting who Raina *does* like. She's small, but she can be scary.”

Raina was small in stature, but her height was where “small” ended. Curves like those weren't for mere gripping. They were for pouring into an open palm like maple syrup dripping from a tree bark.

“Anyway, let me give you a quick rundown of my conversation with Oliver...”

While Delilah continued, he listened with one ear. Now that his mind was on Raina, a crowbar wouldn't release him from thinking about what she was doing now.

How her day was going.

The sound of her voice, her laugh.

The feel of her body in his hands.

Khalid had accused him of having a crush on Khadijah because she was curvy, and back then, he'd denied it, too young to appreciate the beauty of fuller hips, thighs, breasts, and an ass designed by a holy architect. He'd denied it, as if it was something to be ashamed of when biology had given him large hands that were a perfect fit for the notch at Raina's hips.

Raina's body was kryptonite, but unlike Superman, he sought every opportunity to be weakened by the green stone.

Delilah finished the pack of Skittles, ran to grab her phone from her purse, and returned to his desk, this time standing next to his chair with her

elbows on the hard surface.

“So, I feel like a perv for showing you these,” she began, “but these pictures are going to be public anyhow. I figured you might be interested.”

“Pictures of what?”

“Raina’s shoot.”

He was definitely interested.

A combination of interested and pissed.

While he couldn’t justify being angry she’d been in touch with her sister over him, he was still her husband. Virtually any response to his “How are things going?” text would have sufficed.

Delilah handed over her phone.

Immediately, he slid further beneath his desk and fought with deity-like strength to keep his dick from tenting his scrubs.

Sleepwear, his ass.

Technically, it was Raina’s ass, which he couldn’t see in this particular picture, but he knew there was no way the pieces of string draped all over her body turned into anything but a thong in the back.

“That’s one of the tamer ones,” Delilah said. “I’m getting used to the nakedness of the modeling industry, but I’m a work in progress.”

“Is this,” he cocked his head to the side, “lingerie? Why would she send these to you?”

“She sends me photos from all her shoots, but you’re right. These are more on the raunchy side.” She nudged his arm. “Maybe she wanted me to show them to you. I mean, I told her I was coming to see you.”

“Daniels...”

“Sorry. I’ll stop elevating your hopes.”

His brain started to show him an image of Raina above him, her knees on his pillow as he pulled one of those strings to the side, but he shoved it away. Images like those, he reserved for when he was alone and wanted to torture himself, seeing as how he would only ever taste her in his mind.

“Are there...more?”

“Yep.” Delilah scrolled. “Here’s a different one. This looks more like bridal lingerie.”

Mrs. Saraci was a knockout in white lace with pink ribbons. Something like this would have been perfect for their wedding night. He would have enjoyed watching her breasts jump in those too-small cups as he drove his hips into hers.

“...that she wasn’t expecting,” Delilah finished.

“What?”

“You didn’t hear a word I said, did you?”

“What word?”

She laughed and scrolled. The following image brought a completely different reaction.

“Who the fuck is this?”

Delilah peered into his face. “Dr. S, you just used the F-word in front of a student.”

“Former student,” he corrected. “Plus, we’re family. It’s fine.”

“We’re what?”

“Who is this, Daniels?”

She stretched the image, zooming in on the male model’s face. “Maxton Briggs, I think. She told me she was doing a shoot with Layla Briggs’ cousin. You know, the socialite? I’ve never heard of him, but it’s hard to forget a name like ‘Maxton.’”

“Where in Foggy Bottom is this shoot?” He stood, handing her the phone. “Do you have the address?”

“Dr. S, you can’t be thinking of going down there.”

“I’m not ‘thinking’ of it.”

“Aren’t you busy?”

“Not too busy for this.”

“Dr. S, ask her to dinner or something first. You can’t go barging onto the set because you don’t like her doing a photoshoot with a man.”

He pointed to her phone. “That isn’t ‘a photoshoot with a man.’ His tongue was less than three inches from her...private area.”

“Now, is when you censor yourself?”

Fuck was tame compared to *pussy*. At least in his book. He and Khalid had started experimenting with curse words in middle school; however, *pussy* made him blush until the first time he put his face in one.

“Daniels, the address. I know you have it.”

“For emergencies,” she said.

“This is an emergency.”

“Dr. S, this won’t make Raina amenable to you. You’re not her husband. Even then, you’d be free to be upset about it, but you still can’t go down there guns blazing.”

He removed his ring from the pocket of his scrubs and slid it onto his

finger, internally grumbling about how he told this kid way too damn much. Delilah didn't even know he'd married her sister, and already, to him, she was *his* sister.

Delilah grabbed his hand and brought it closer to her face. "I've seen this ring somewhere before."

"This specific ring?" he asked.

"The pattern. Wait, is this a wedding ring?" She continued to study the dual-toned band, eyes narrowed. "Dr. S? My brain's coming up with a weird scenario involving you and Raina."

"How weird?"

"Dr. S, *is this a wedding ring?*"

"I ran into your sister at a conference in Vegas," he explained. "One thing led to another...and we got married."

Delilah covered her mouth.

"Alcohol might have been involved. Don't tell her I told you. No one knows. I mean, outside of a room full of conference attendees, but no one important kn—Delilah, breathe."

"1231 Pennsylvania Avenue," she choked out. "Suite 300. But I'm coming with you. I *must* come with you. I have so many questions."

He retrieved her laptop bag, and she held open the office door for him to walk through. As they headed down the hallway, she hooked her arm through his.

"Did you propose?"

He groaned. "Daniels."

"I'm a romantic."

"Evidently."

"Would you have, then? If you had the chance?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"*Daniels.*"

"Dr. S, I can't help it. This is you. This is my sister. This is the best news I've gotten since the realtor called to let me and Miguel know we got the condo and would finally be living together."

Right before they entered the elevator, he spotted Emmaline watching them from the other side of the corridor.

Raina's lack of communication had been so prevalent on his mind that he forgot he and Emmaline performed a combined surgery that morning. They

worked together more often now than when they were together, but he knew it was because Emmaline was specifically seeking him out.

It was work, so he didn't mind.

She knew where his boundaries lay.

How news like this could affect her wasn't why he kept his nuptials hidden, removing his ring while at work, although he kept it nearby. The last she'd heard, he was hopelessly infatuated with an unnamed woman. It wouldn't be unheard of for him to have married this woman, but he didn't want to broadcast a marriage that would be over in a few weeks.

"Did Raina ask for an annulment?" Delilah asked.

He pushed the button for the parking garage floor. "Yes...well, no. Not really. I suggested one, and she agreed that we should do it."

"Do you want one?"

"I like her. You know I do. But I don't like the circumstances surrounding how we got married."

"Drunk."

"Yes. If she was sober, she wouldn't have married me. We'd be dating," and he would dare her to say otherwise, "but she wouldn't legally bind herself to me."

Delilah tapped her bottom lip. "Honestly, Dr. S, I don't know. Raina can usually hold her liquor. She can drink my brother and his friends under the table, and then she'll have them in yoga in the morning, all bright and cheery while they're half dead."

"It's usually the same for me," he said.

"Maybe the drinks were extra strong. Maybe," she dropped her voice to a coarse whisper, "Cupid roofied you both."

Dramatic as it was, it would be a morbidly entertaining story to tell their families, Cupid ditching the bow and arrows to take a more chemical approach to matchmaking. There was a major hole in Delilah's theory, however.

"What if I could help you?" she asked. "Help you stay married."

He nodded. "Okay."

"You're not going to ask me how?"

"No."

"You like my sister that much?"

"More."

She squeezed his arm tighter. "I never thought the day would come when

you'd be my brother-in-law. You're into Raina, and she's into you, but you're both so difficult."

"What did you say?" They stopped in front of his car. "She's into me? Did she tell you that?"

If she was, she could forget an annulment. He would become an even bigger dick than he currently was and fight the dissolution as if they'd been married for years and his entire fortune was on the line.

Delilah flicked her wrist. "I'm only guessing because I know my sister."

"You're lying."

"I plead the fifth."

"Daniels, don't...don't do that."

Raina having feelings for him was like being seven years old and learning that Santa Claus did exist.

"Brother-in-law, prepare to be pestered," Delilah said. "Back then, I was just your mentee. Now, we're family. For the holidays, keep your schedule free. You and Raina will be there as demon husband and wicked wife."

"Your family would accept me, you think?" he found himself asking, no matter how hard he'd tried to stop the question from leaving his mouth.

"With open arms. I mean, yes, there'll be some initial confusion considering you're only eleven years older than Raina, more age-appropriate than we're used to seeing her with. Why do you think they wouldn't?"

He shrugged. "I don't come from a wealthy family."

"Neither did my parents."

"I'm agnostic."

"Again, not a problem. One Sunday at the church my father grew up attending could turn the Pope into an atheist."

He held back a smile.

"Plus, I think my mother will find your bristly personality endearing." The right side of her mouth hitched upward. "We don't have to tell them about the marriage, but you and Raina can still be dating. If not, you can come as my guest again, like you did for the football game earlier this year."

His Turkish family had "celebrated" Thanksgiving growing up. It wasn't official, but his mother, intrigued by the custom, had wanted them to participate in it—in their own way. Their spread consisted of a layered cheese pie called börek, baklava, şakşuka, döner lamb kebabs, kofta meatballs, at least four different soups, and dolma, seasoned rice wrapped in a vine leaf.

And a turkey.

“I’ve never told you this, but my best friend growing up was a kid named Khalid,” he said. “Khalid Akello. Sometimes, you remind me of him. You have similar personalities.”

“Are you saying we’re friends?” she asked.

“No.”

“I think you’re saying we’re friends.” She nodded, evidently to solidify her statement. “But I like that name, Khalid. I hope to meet him one day.”

He didn’t comment, and Delilah didn’t let him go until he peeled her off his arm for them to get inside the car.

Chapter Eight

Raina eyed the man crouched in front of her, his tongue extended toward the lacy, nearly see-through panties she wore the same way a child might begrudgingly stick out their tongue for a pediatrician. A spiked necklace hugged his throat, one end attached to a leather strip in her hand.

“Max, if you want to be somewhere else, you’re free to leave,” she said.

Maxton Briggs stood, tried to adjust the necklace, failed, and stomped his bare foot into the mattress underneath them. “Look, no offense, but this isn’t how I envisioned my career going,” he said. “I thought I would be on the cover of *Vanity Fair* or *GQ*. Maybe even *Time*. Just because you’re okay with smut, Raina, doesn’t mean we all have to be. Sometimes, it’s better to have more class than ass.”

She studied his face, brow raised, and motioned to the event coordinator. “I’m taking a break. When I get back, I want Mr. Briggs gone.”

Maxton’s mouth fell open. “You can’t do that.”

“Miss Daniels is the alpha here,” the event coordinator said. “Come on, Briggs. You’re done.”

Raina dropped the rope, turned away from the twenty-two-year-old toddler, and one of the event staff helped her down off the heart-shaped California King. Another handed her a robe that she immediately wrapped around her body.

Before this shoot, Maxton Briggs’ only modeling experience had come from haphazardly edited smartphone camera photos on his social media feed. He was the type who thought that just because something looked easy for a person with experience, it would be simple for a newbie, disregarding the amount of time it usually took to build that kind of expertise.

Working with her, and for a famous music artist's new lingerie line was a massive step through the door. If he'd studied her career like he'd claimed when they were first introduced—or so much as glanced at her social media—he would have seen that only a small fraction of her bookings presented her as a half-naked dominatrix.

The photographer, who went by Blaze at work and Jayson everywhere else, called her over. After boosting her self-confidence and social energy with a deep breath, she tightened the robe and joined him.

“What do you think, babe?” He tapped the screen with an index finger. “Fire as usual, right?”

She mustered up a dash of enthusiasm. “Yeah. Fire as usual.”

“See right here?” He zoomed in on her stomach. “Don't worry about that. That little flab of skin won't make post. By the time these are up, you'll be perfect.”

“What about my stretch marks?” The ones that created faint stripes in her dark skin along her hips before cupping her ass like a mini skirt.

“Gone,” he said.

“What if we kept them this time? I mean, it's not like I did them to myself. They're a natural part of me.”

He shook his head, smacking on a piece of gum he seemed to have manifested from his inner cheeks. “Nuh-uh. I love, *love* working with you, RD, so I will *not* have tiger stripes ruining that gorgeous body of yours. You have worked too hard to look the way you do. This is why God created Photoshop, honey.”

She tore her gaze away from the “flab.” In the past, she would have spent hours fixating on that spot, and the more she fixated, in her mind, the larger it would grow. Then, it would become grossly distorted, and she'd try to remedy the problem by seeking perfection that kept moving the line the closer she got to the invisible goal marker.

“Thanks, Blaze,” she said.

She gave him a quick hug and headed for the emptiest, quietest corner she could find in the busy, overcrowded studio. As she passed the buffet spread provided by the company, her stomach rumbled. However, after the next series of photos, she would grab something to eat. That way, she wouldn't bloat, giving the editors even more feats to accomplish when they went in to tackle her “flab.”

Estelle Diallo, her assistant and stylist, intercepted her on the way to the

empty corner, and she nearly cried.

A minute to herself.

All she wanted was a minute to herself.

“So, right after this, we’re headed to the next shoot two floors above us in suite 500,” Estelle informed her. “That’s for Elite Sports.”

Estelle, the daughter of her mother’s second cousin—twice removed—had been by her side since she joined the modeling industry at eighteen. They essentially began their careers at the same time, but based on the way things had gone, Estelle seemed to have been made for the role. However, even Estelle had expressed wanting to do something else with her life after she turned thirty-six at the end of the year.

Raina motioned to the robe. “Will I be clothed for the Elite Sports photoshoot?”

Estelle nodded. “Yes, it’s sportswear: leggings, sneakers, tops, T-shirts, jackets. We have the shoot today and one more on Friday. For the one on Friday, I set up a little surprise for you. This *will* be a long week, so I’ll add as much levity as possible.”

“What’s the surprise?”

“Raina, it’s called a surprise for a reason.”

Unfortunately, Estelle wouldn’t know how to surprise her with what, or who, she wanted most. She was the only person in the entire rented-out building who knew Lucas would not only be a good surprise but the best kind.

Evil man.

Somehow, he’d made her miss him.

Estelle had been in charge of her phone all day, so as far as she knew, he hadn’t texted or called. Unless it was an emergency, not even her family would contact her, knowing how busy she would be this week. The main upside was that the longer she avoided Lucas, the longer she could stay married to him.

“By the way, I sent those shots to Delilah,” Estelle said. “And I forgot to tell you that you received a text earlier from someone you have in your phone as Dr. Doom.”

If Delilah had received the pictures, Lucas might have seen them. They would be stitched and tucked by the time they made it online, and she wanted him to see her in all of her half-naked glory, stripes, flab, dimples, and all.

Ninety percent of the men she’d dated in the last five years were over the

age of fifty-five. Not only had she been able to avoid love, but she'd entered the "relationships" toeing the line of "escort."

No feelings.

No expectations.

No family.

Events only.

If they had anything negative to say about her body, skin, hair, or complexion, leaving was simple.

What she'd found most surprising was how often they *did* find something negative to say about her body. Foolishly, she'd assumed that since she was "the catch," they would have accepted her as she was, but there had to be a secret website where men purchase audacity.

Perhaps *Amazon.men*.

Then Lucas entered the picture. Lucas, who made her heart delude itself into believing it was Luci Collins, Dominique Dawes, or Simone Biles whenever he opened his mouth or looked at her.

And heaven forbid he smiled.

The way she missed him, any sane person would have assumed she'd last seen him months ago rather than a week ago. Still, the last thing she wanted to do was mess around and be so authentic with him that if he accepted her the way she was, she'd fall for him harder than tungsten.

Had Delilah not mentioned that she would see Lucas today, she would have never sent that particular batch of photos. Her poor sister had only recently stopped running from the room, screaming with her hands covering her eyes, whenever the models began to disrobe.

Blaze announced that the set change was almost done and that he would be ready to start in five minutes.

Raina flicked a long gaze at the empty corner. Then she followed Estelle to squeeze into her next outfit—panties that would give Barbie a wedgie, a bra with cups only a half-inch larger than her areolas, and fishnet leggings with holes wider than the windows on a downtown high-rise.

"Stelle, I'm pretty sure these panties are cutting my labia into quadrants." She wiggled, trying to adjust the fabric. "That's why these are made to be removed almost immediately."

Estelle helped her into a pair of heels. "Just a little while longer, okay? I promise."

"I'm not blaming you, Stelle. I swear. I'm just hangry." And missing a

particular grumpy physician.

Estelle circled her, fixing stray hairs, microlink extensions, and snipping loose threads. “By the way, they got rid of the brat like you asked. Christian DeBonaire’s replacing him.”

“He’s doing Fashion Week?”

“Yep, and he was already in the building. He found out that you were here and all but stumbled over himself for a chance to take the Briggs kid’s place.”

Christian DeBonaire was one of the industry’s most sought-after male models with the blond-haired, blue-eyed, rugged good looks that had landed him on various covers, websites, commercials, and TV shows.

Christian had probably stumbled over himself to accept because he’d propositioned her more than once. Unfortunately, it was never for dinner, a movie, a drink, or even a cup of coffee.

Or a breakfast date.

There were simply not enough breakfast date offers in her life. She was a completely different person over pancakes and waffles than she was over veggies and rice.

She returned to the set, the heart-shaped bed gone and replaced with a plain green backdrop. Christian entered, barefoot and wearing a satin robe and matching shorts, the robe open to show off the toned ridges of his stomach. When he noticed her, he smiled, and then his gaze drifted down the length of her body.

“Raina.” He leaned down for a hug. “It’s good to see you. How long has it been now, a year?”

“About,” she said.

“Good God, almighty.” He stuck his middle finger into one of the fishnet openings and wrapped the string around the tip. “They didn’t tell me you would be wearing something like this. Turn around for me?”

“Nah, I’m good.”

Chuckling, he placed his mouth right next to her ear. “Come on, Raina. Let me stick my cock in that beautiful ass.”

She shook her head. “No, thanks. I’m not a cock person.”

“Oh?” He eased back, eyebrow lifted. “I mean, I’m down for a threesome. I know some women who’d willingly join us.”

“That’s not what I mean.”

It felt like eons since she’d last had the pleasure of the company of a

penis, but she wasn't a *cock* person. She happened to be more fond of *dick*—riding, stroking, kissing, swallowing.

“Enough foreplay, you two,” Blaze teased, camera raised. “Now, show me what I want. Give me so much sexy, I come on myself.”

One thing she wouldn't miss about the industry was the energy; she didn't know how she'd managed as long as she had. Sometimes, all it took was a two-minute conversation to wear her down.

“I want those legs around him, RD,” Blaze instructed. “Christian, grab that magnificent ass and lift her off her feet.”

Christian bent.

Her heels left the ground.

But then Christian was suddenly a few feet away, and his arms were nowhere near her body.

A familiar cologne seeped into her nostrils, and her legs enveloped the newcomer's midsection, not needing her brain to catch up to the situation at hand. Whenever he came within a few feet of her, her brain took a backseat.

“I'm sorry, but who the hell is this sexy beast in the scrubs?” Blaze demanded. “Wait your turn, Dr. Hot-As-Fuck.”

She looked up into Lucas' eyes, and she couldn't see the forest for the trees.

“A word, Mrs. Saraci?” he said.

She didn't break eye contact. “Blaze, I need a few minutes. I need to talk to Dr. Hot-As-Fuck. It's...important.”

Blaze sucked his teeth, and the noise echoed throughout the entire studio. “Important? RD, who the heck is this man?”

“He's my husband.” She pointed over Lucas' shoulder. “Saraci? Head in that direction. I'll tell you when to stop.”

* * *

She led him to a room she'd used for all of twenty seconds when she first arrived on set a little before six o'clock that morning. Since then, it had transitioned from a dressing room into a dumping ground.

Branded bags littered the floor.

A table spanned nearly the entire length of the room, tucked beneath rows of lighted mirrors. Half-empty drink bottles, sprays, makeup, and to-go

coffee cups with faded lipstick stains covered so much of the table's surface that the gray wood was barely visible.

Flimsy chairs were scattered about, some overturned and others draped with various outfits. Short pieces of hair from last-minute haircuts added a haphazard design to the plain, velvet-blue carpet.

But the room was empty.

And it had a door.

As the door shut behind Lucas, she waited for him to set her on her feet. Yet, her ankles remained locked at the base of his spine, her heels no longer clicking together as he stormed through the hallways and corridors.

"You can put me down now," she said.

His large hands further cupped her ass. "I know."

"How'd you find me?"

"Delilah."

"Delilah came with you? I didn't see her." She'd seen nothing but eyes that looked like they were envisioning her over his knee, his palm swatting her behind while he punished her for her bad behavior.

"Miguel called her when we got here. I'm fairly certain she's still in the car talking to him."

She stroked the back of his neck, barely able to conceal her excitement over the fact that he was there. That he came. Friday would have been too long, but the sooner they saw each other, the sooner they were over.

"Did you know Delilah was coming to see me?" he asked.

She shrugged. "She mentioned it."

"So you wanted me to see those pictures?"

Yes.

"She was free to show them to whoever she wanted."

He tipped his head in the direction of the studio. "Do all your shoots consist of men putting their hands on you while you're half naked?"

"They're just photos, Saraci."

"Erotic photos," he said. "With my *wife*. There was no way I wouldn't have come down here after seeing them, especially after I didn't hear from you all day."

"It's not even seven o'clock yet."

"*All day.*"

"My assistant, Estelle? She's been in charge of my phone. When I say that I haven't had more than a few minutes of downtime today," her fingers

slipped into his hair, “I’m not kidding. I really couldn’t see you today. If I could have, I would have. I know how much you want this thing to be over.”

She’d yet to slide, feel heavy, or witness any semblance of strain on his face.

That was the paradox about men.

Many of the things that made them terrifying also made them intriguing, and the line separating the paradox could sometimes be darker than coal or nothing more than a hair-thin string of consent.

Lucas set her on her feet and found what had to be the furthest seat from where she stood, a leather barstool, and sat, one foot planted on the floor. The deep, bergamot-vanilla notes of his cologne went with him.

She remained standing.

Neither one of them spoke for a moment, and she knew it would only be a matter of time before someone came looking for her. She’d signed contracts to be here this week, and the brands would bleed her dry to get their money’s worth.

She cocked her head to the side, taking him in, her first time seeing him in scrubs, certain no piece of clothing existed that wouldn’t look good on him. Quite possibly, she loved the scrubs more than she loved the suits.

“I like you in scrubs.” She slipped her feet out of the shoes, and her toes immediately wiggled, happy for the taste of freedom. “You should do a shoot with me one of these days.”

He pointed to her feet. “Do they hurt?”

“They’re a little sore from the shoes.”

“Come here.”

She went.

They switched places.

While she climbed onto the bar stool, he grabbed a chair, took a seat, and set her foot on his lap. “Tell me if you feel pain,” he instructed. “Also, tell me if you feel anything odd, like a reduced sensation or numbness.”

He lightly massaged the base of her toes, focusing on the movements of his hands and fingers. In the meantime, she stared at the top of his head. An annulment was the right decision, a fair decision. She’d taken advantage of him, and they didn’t have to be married to date.

“It must be torture,” she said.

He didn’t look up. “It is.”

“What am I talking about?”

“What *are* you talking about?”

“Being married to me. You’ve been my husband for longer than a week now. I’m surprised you’ve lasted this long.”

He pressed his thumb against the sole of her foot, and she grabbed the edge of her seat to prevent herself from flying right off the stool.

“Pain?” he asked.

She nodded. “It’s a little sore, yeah.”

“If you have to wear those,” he indicated the shoes with a tilt of his head, “don’t do any walking in them and wear them for as short a period as possible. Stay off your feet when you can.” He pressed again, gentler. “And I’ve barely seen you, so how could it be torture to be married to you for a week?”

“Could you imagine if Fashion Week was later?” She snorted a laugh. “Like, what if it had been a month away rather than a week?”

His fingers moved toward her ankles. “Are you implying that I wouldn’t have lasted being married to you for longer than a week?”

“Saraci, you wouldn’t last a month married to me.”

He looked up. “A month? That’s too easy.”

“Three months, then.”

He reached out, lifted her clear off the stool, and brought her down onto his lap. “Don’t do that,” he warned.

“Do what?”

“Test me.”

“Saraci, in two weeks, you’d walk out, never mind three months. We do not get along.”

“I disagree.”

“Unless we’re drunk or tired, we’re tearing each other’s heads off.”

Also, if they were lucky, someone would show up looking for them in the next five minutes. She wasn’t wearing nearly enough clothing to be this close to him.

“You can put my name on your paper,” he said.

She stopped breathing. “What?”

“Stay married to me for three months, and you can add Lucas Saraci, M.D., to your paper. I’ve contributed to research on the epigenetics of head and neck cancer and disease progression published in the *New England Journal of Medicine*. It won’t be an issue for me to contribute to your research.”

The New England Journal of Medicine was one of, if not the most prestigious medical journal in the world, but her husband was being modest. He'd published more than one paper in the NEJM. There were birth control methods with higher failure rates than the probability of being published in the NEJM.

“Saraci, that’s funding, credibility, networking...” Her heart beat so hard, she eased away from him, needing more space for each muscle contraction. “This could help us translate our findings into real-world applications. Something as simple as adding a psychosocial questionnaire to intake forms at doctor’s offices would make a world of difference in the continuity of care.”

He smiled

They both knew he had her.

“So, Mrs. Saraci,” he began, “that sounds like a yes to me.”

Chapter Nine

How he managed to keep his composure and any semblance of decency with Raina sitting half-naked on top of him, wearing fishnets, Lucas didn't know.

“Three months?” she asked.

In a month, she would crave him.

In three months, she could love him.

She shifted, which forced his hands higher, off her hips and onto her back. When his fingertips met her skin, her eyelids twitched, and he helplessly traced the curve of her spine.

Raina didn't know the power she wielded over him. It was laughable that she was actually “contemplating” his offer when the woman was sitting half-naked on his lap and smelled like figs covered in honey and whipped cream. All she had to do was ask, and he would do the research for her.

That helplessness was another thing he despised about this beautiful woman. The desire to *do* for her—anything, everything, all the things. The way she brought out a version of him he'd promised Khalid, Dr. A...too many people...he would never lose.

His backstory, the one he created to have equal footing in the circles he now ran in, was that his family emigrated from Bulgaria to Turkey in the mid-fifties when his mother was a child. Then, when *he* was a child, they immigrated to the United States, and as far as anyone was concerned, he came from a family of successful individuals. He *was* the quintessential “American Dream” success story.

To everyone else, he fit in.

However, if Raina accepted him for everything he was, from the more pristine parts to the ones that would forever harbor chips and scars, he would

do everything in his power to make her the happiest woman walking the earth.

“Did you even look up the annulment requirements?” he asked.

“Not yet. I was too busy preparing for,” she yawned into the back of her hand, “Fashion Week. Have you?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

Because he *wanted* to stay married to her. He *wanted* her to be his wife. He just didn’t know how to tell her that.

“Work,” he said.

“Honestly?” She graced him with a tired smile and fussed with his hair. “I’m still in a state of shock that we did it. I mean, how cliché is that? Getting drunk in Vegas and waking up married.”

It was cliché.

At least, it would have been.

Had he been drunk at the time.

Admittedly, in the beginning, he’d been a little more than tipsy, but by the time they made it to the jeweler’s, his mind was clearer than the sky on a perfect day in the Seychelles.

There had been plenty of opportunities to back out of the marriage idea. Once, as they’d passed a twenty-four-hour diner, he’d considered calling everything off and asking her on a breakfast date for the following morning.

But he liked her.

And he was selfish.

“Are you stalling?” he asked.

She shook her head. “I’m giving you time to back out.”

“I won’t.”

“You’re okay with staying married to me for three months?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

He was fine with staying married to her for even longer than that. This woman was worth every headache, all the heartburn. It was something he knew, something he unwittingly started to learn ever since that fateful presentation.

“Then, Lucas Saraci, for the next three months, I’ll be your Mrs. Saraci,” she said. “But we’ll need to lay some ground rules. For instance,” her gaze briefly dropped to his lips, “how real is this marriage going to be? Because we barely like breathing each other’s air.”

On the contrary, he didn't mind breathing her air. If given the opportunity, he would suck it right from her mouth.

Someone knocked on the door, and it wasn't a moment too soon. At some point, his fingers had left her back and dipped south, but they got stuck trying to decide whether to grip her ass or slide down the seam.

"Plus, you talk a good game," she continued. "But when it comes down to it, you're probably no different from most other men."

The right side of his mouth tugged. "And how's that?"

"You've only ever seen me dressed up and made up. Perfectly put together. You want me because you think I'm pretty, but the minute you find things you don't like, the minute you see me without all the flair and flashiness, you'll bolt."

Or he would fall in love.

Raina, without the flair and flashiness, was exactly what he wanted. A dream come true would be them lying on the sofa, watching a TV series they promised to watch together, her wearing his clothes, fresh-faced and smelling like lotion and body wash.

"Raina, I woke up next to you in Vegas," he reminded her.

She'd had sleep in her eyes and threads from the sheets in her messy hair, splayed across his chest and snoring like an English bulldog. Still, his first thought had been to pull her closer.

Don't let her go.

Hold her for as long as he could.

The knock grew more insistent, and a woman's voice followed. "*Raina, it's me. If you two are done, let me put you back in order so we can head to the set.*"

Raina glanced at the door. "Put me back in order? Does she think we're in here having sex?"

"You told them I was your husband," he said. "You're dressed like this, and we've been behind a locked door. I'd think so too. If I had my way, I would be in here fucking you."

"And what's 'your way'?"

"Your lips begging me to make love to you."

She eased off his lap. "I probably won't be done here until late tonight. Do you think you can wait until Friday to talk?"

"No."

"What if I promise to call you? I swear, this isn't me backing out. I really

just am that busy this week.”

He scratched at the neatly trimmed hairs on his jaw. “Spend the weekend with me, and you have an agreement.”

The woman called again. “*Raina?*”

“I’m coming, Stelle!”

“*Coming out here or... ‘coming’?*”

“I’ll stay the weekend,” she said. “Are you leaving or staying? I have to finish this shoot, one more sportswear shoot, and then I have a couple of meetings.”

“Can I watch this one before heading back?” he asked.

“Of course, Saraci.”

“Then I’ll stay for a little bit.”

She started for the door.

With a grunt he felt in his chest, he pulled her back to him, wrapped one arm around her waist, and used his other hand to cup the back of her head. He loved the control it gave him, the ability to turn her head...

“*Lucas.*”

She’d breathed his name against his mouth. At some point, his lips had landed on hers, and he told himself not to *take*.

To only *taste*.

“*Raina.*” He hoisted her into the air and pressed her back against the door. “Holy shit, *Raina.*”

His tongue disappeared inside her mouth, and his mind screamed the word “gentle,” but he was hungry. He’d been hungry for her for too long not to take and taste, bite and suck.

Their mouths came together in angry bursts, hard and wet, a blur of soft flesh and hot tongues, and he didn’t care if he never again took a full breath without first stealing some of her oxygen.

“*Raina...*”

“Yes, Lucas?”

Fuck, he loved how she said his name.

She consumed all the free space in his mind, her mouth silky and warm, his tongue delving inside and flicking every soft surface it found.

Restraint seeping in, he started to pull away.

But then she slid her fingers into his hair. The kiss slowed, and she brought her hand to the side of his face, kissing him like she’d missed him. Like she’d been looking forward to seeing him. Like she wanted him inside

her as much as he wanted to be inside her, driving deep in steady strokes as he brushed her damp skin with his lips.

The assistant knocked.

Gradually, they separated.

“That won’t happen again,” he choked out, setting her on her feet. “Not unless you beg.”

After piercing him with a long look that nearly had him reaching for her again, she opened the door. The woman on the other side scanned her from top to bottom.

“Oh. You look fine.”

“We didn’t have sex,” Raina said, her voice hoarse and tight and so sexy he nearly broke. “But I will need to clean up.”

He watched them go, hit with the sudden realization that his biggest mistake was walking across that banquet hall.

Meeting her.

Fighting with her.

Had he shut his mouth, he could have avoided months of wondering what it would feel like pressed against hers. The number of times he made love to her in his dreams should have brought him a fraction of shame, but the only thing he woke up with was longing.

Had Raina paid closer attention, she would have easily guessed he’d been nowhere near inebriated in Vegas. Lucas Saraci didn’t make mistakes, and he’d spent his life perfecting everything he touched.

His hands healed, fixed.

When he spoke, people listened.

Lucas Saraci *did not* have to clench his fists and plant his heels to stop himself from grabbing a woman, laying her down, spreading her legs, and not coming up for air until his tongue was numb.

Gathering his composure, he found his way back to the shoot.

There, he learned that Raina had slipped into another pair of heels. There, he saw her body from every angle the photographer requested, which left him so captivated he no longer cared how the male model touched her. In his mind, those were his hands, and the things he wanted to do to his wife...

“Are you really her husband?”

He looked down into the dark eyes of the woman from before, the woman’s braids coiled in an intricate style on top of her head.

“Yes,” he said.

“I’m Estelle, Raina’s stylist and assistant. What do I call you?”

“Lucas.”

“Are you a doctor, Lucas, or are you a model who had a shoot where you dressed up as a doctor?”

He almost smiled. “I’m a surgeon.”

Estelle scratched the underside of her chin. “Impressive. I wonder why she didn’t tell me she got married. Hell, I didn’t even know you existed before today.”

“Maybe she’s ashamed of me.”

“I’ve known Raina for twelve years. Trust me, she’s nowhere near the realm of being ashamed of you.” She motioned to him. “By the way, you don’t have to stand back there in the shadows. You can come closer.”

Raina exchanged the fishnets for a full-body version, and the panties were swapped out for a thong. Then she removed the heels, the model picked her up, and his mind showed him Raina, at his condo, lying on his bed. He saw himself spreading her legs, their gazes locked with her still wearing that full-body netting. His wife would look so lovely taking his dick.

“Lucas?” Estelle called.

“It’s fine.” He shook his head. “I’ll stay right here.”

Chapter Ten

Tuesday

Despite Friday being only a few days away, this week was shaping up to be one of the longest of Raina's life. It was even longer than the week she and her brother spent at her aunt and uncle's luxury apartment in Dakar. For three days straight, she and O.B. lost about a gallon each of tears, crying that they wanted to go home to their parents. By the end of the week, they cried to stay in Dakar.

A little before one o'clock, a nervous-looking man wearing scrubs showed up with a bouquet of carnations and a carton of grilled eggplant paninis. Stuck to the carton was a Post-It—as if she wouldn't immediately know who'd sent the delivery.

She took the food and flowers to her shared dressing room, which was a mess but graciously empty, and peeled the note off the clear container lid.

*Make sure you eat, Rai.
If not, you'll be in trouble.
With me.*

*By the way, don't tip the courier.
He's a resident.
He volunteered to do this.
I didn't even have to ask.
It's like they're scared of me or something.*

*Yours,
- Dr. Saraci*

She rolled her eyes, smiling. "I can't believe he signed this 'Dr. Saraci.'" "From the hubby?"

She shrieked, nearly knocking the container clear off the table; the rabbit

food the company offered for lunch wouldn't come close to being an adequate replacement.

"Is that from the hubby?" Estelle peered at the note. "Is that why you're sitting here grinning like that?"

Raina tucked the note into her robe's pocket. "I'm not grinning."

"You were. Just like this." Estelle stretched her mouth into a broad smile and opened her eyes so wide, her lashes came close to touching her brows. "I'm most curious about how this guy got you to fall this far in love with him, and is he an only child? I mean, I want someone to send me flowers and paninis too."

She didn't know whether Lucas was an only child. In fact, she didn't know anything about his family life outside of what Delilah had shared, which wasn't much.

"How much time do I have to eat?" she asked.

Estelle leaned her hip against the table's edge. "Twelve minutes. Now, stop avoiding the question. The only age-appropriate male you've ever dated was Mr. What's-His-Face in New York. The one who played college football with your brother. Every other guy? They could have gone to school with either of your parents. What's different about the surgeon? It can't be his money."

Raina looked around as if O.B. would suddenly manifest out of thin air. Several times, O.B. had asked her if she was seeing Kamal Whitmore, and she'd lied *every single time*. While O.B. never tried to regulate who she and Delilah dated, he would have had he known.

O.B. couldn't stand Kamal.

Three months into the relationship, she learned why when Kamal thought raising a fist would get her to "fall in line." Quickly, she reminded him why she was not the one.

The best thing she ever did for her brother's career was making sure he never found out. O.B. would have killed him. Without question, Miguel and Carson would have helped.

"When was the wedding?" Estelle probed. "As long as we've known each other, you couldn't invite me?"

"We eloped," she said.

"Do your folks know?"

"Not yet."

"Your mother doesn't know?" Estelle whistled and left the dressing room,

humming a tune that Raina immediately picked up on as, “*Raina’s in love.*”

But she wasn’t.

It had been a long time since anyone had seen her sincerely interested in someone; of course, it would look like love to the untrained eye.

She popped a couple of digestive enzymes and gas pills and scarfed down the paninis. Yesterday was lacy lingerie. Today, she was working on her first animation photography photoshoot, and the shoot required a skintight bodysuit so close to her complexion, she looked naked.

DR. DOOM

I received a notification that your lunch was delivered.

Are you eating?

RAINA DANIELS

I am.

It’s delicious.

And thank you for the flowers.

DR. DOOM

Flowers?

I didn’t send you flowers.

She raised an eyebrow. “You didn’t? Well, who did?”

As she was getting ready to respond, another text came through.

DR. DOOM

Joking.

You're welcome.

RAINA DANIELS

Hilarious.

I'll call you later?

Around 9.

DR. DOOM

You almost made me use an emoticon.

The smiling one.

RAINA DANIELS

An *emoji,* Saraci. They're called emojis.

Wednesday

Today, she looked forward to lunch being delivered, which turned out to be burritos made with spicy Chipotle Field Roast sausages. Lucas also sent another bouquet of flowers, lilies, and it was as if he was specifically searching for flowers that weren't roses.

RAINA S.

Thank you for lunch.

And the lilies.

When an hour passed and Estelle didn't notify her of any new messages, she requested an impromptu bathroom break. Then, after sneaking her phone from her tote bag, she hid inside a bathroom stall. A message from Lucas came through right as she was about to hit *send*.

SARACI

You're welcome.

Thank you for the message this morning.

The procedure did go well.

RAINA S.

That's awesome.

Want to talk again later?

SARACI

Of course.

I can't sleep if I don't hear from you.

See how charming I can be?

Perhaps you should comment on my charm.

RAINA S.

This is my comment on Lucas' charm. This message will self-destruct in 20 seconds.

SARACI

:-)

RAINA S.

Just use an emoji, Saraci. 🙄

“Raina?” Estelle pounded on the stall door. “You really can't wait until later to talk to this man? You see each other at the end of the day.”

Only via a video screen.

“And you sleep in the same bed.”

Only in her dreams.

Begrudgingly, she opened the door. Estelle extended a hand, and she slapped the phone onto Estelle's palm.

“The sex must be out of this world for you to be acting like this,” Estelle said. “Is that what you've been doing? Sexting when you can wait until later to jump on him?”

She didn't comment.

Thursday

Lunch came right on time, fried rice piled high with vegetables that would test the limits of her digestive pills. Lucas had also sent sunflowers, the lilies and carnations still alive and well, in the guest room at Miguel and Delilah's.

While she ate, she stared at the bouquet, thinking about Estelle's comments from the day before. When she left, she went to her sister's condo. If she and Lucas were going to be married for three months—at least—it would make sense for her to go home to him. They couldn't be a married couple in the truest sense of the word without living together.

Her phone vibrated, and she nearly broke her wrist grasping for it.

The man had her twisted all out of sorts. If she worked for sixteen hours straight, he was on her mind for the entire sixteen hours, plus the hours leading up to her falling asleep later that night. Then, he showed up in her dreams.

The egomaniac turned out to be a sweet and thoughtful egomaniac who made her laugh and smile to herself when no one else was around. He was charming her, softening and ripening her.

LUCAS SARACI

Did you send me lunch?

No one's ever sent me lunch before.

Thank you, Rai.

RAINA E. SARACI

You're welcome, baby.

You said you'd be busy.

I wanted to make sure my hubby ate.

LUCAS SARACI

Baby? Hubby?

I feel like you're setting me up for something.

A poisoning.

Or maybe a butcher knife to the aorta.

RAINA E. SARACI

I'm sweet.

LUCAS SARACI

I'll confirm that at a later date.

“Raina, where'd you run off to this time? Girl, when I find you...”

She peered through the slit in the maintenance closet as Estelle walked by. Today, there were dozens of models and influencers on set, and the company had lunch catered, expecting everyone to eat together.

But she wanted Lucas' lunch.

Plus, texting him in a loud, wide-open room reminiscent of a high school cafeteria didn't offer her the same level of intimacy.

RAINA E. SARACI

How would you confirm that?

LUCAS SARACI

Gustation.

Now, I received a notification. It's asking me to update your contact information.

Did you change your name to Raina E. Saraci?

RAINA E. SARACI
I'm committing to the role.

LUCAS SARACI
What does the E stand for?

RAINA E. SARACI
Elodie.

LUCAS SARACI
Beautiful.
My parents went with Keegan. They searched high and low for the whitest-sounding names possible for me and my siblings.

RAINA E. SARACI
They did so on purpose?

LUCAS SARACI
Yes.
My parents always knew they wanted to move to the US, and they didn't want our names to sound too "foreign" to hold us back from opportunities.

RAINA E. SARACI

I can relate.

Maybe we should name our first kid Keegan. (I'm joking, btw.)

How many siblings do you

The door to the broom closet opened, and she looked up, her fork perched between her lips.

Estelle stormed over and extended her hand.

Groaning and close to throwing a tantrum her infant nephews would be ashamed of, she slapped the phone onto Estelle's palm.

"Raina, get out of here and go eat in the cafeteria," Estelle said. "Like a normal person."

Friday

Friday proved to be just as, if not more, chaotic than Monday. It was the last day of Fashion Week, so Friday was when any mistakes made earlier in the week were rectified, and all loose ends were tied up.

It was so busy that she didn't get a chance to sneak away with her phone, and she'd managed only a few bites of Lucas' lunch. Then she'd sniffed just one hibiscus flower from the tropical bouquet he sent with her sweet potato and lentil soup, both delivered by another nervous-looking resident.

"Stop looking at me like that," Estelle said.

She clasped her hands beneath her chin. "Let me see my phone for a few minutes. To check in. I haven't talked to him all day."

Estelle slid her a side-eye as they stepped off the elevator. "Where did you and Lucas meet, by the way?"

"We met back in Athens."

"Athens? Not at your presentation. Raina, that was over a year ago." Estelle frowned. "If that's the case, when did you start dating?"

Just like that, Estelle had given her yet another thing to add to the list she and Lucas had been building in a shared note file.

"Can I have my phone to do one thing?"

"So, you're just going to ignore my question?" Estelle pulled the phone from the large tote bag. "Tell me what it is. I'll do it. We're already running behind."

"It's private."

Estelle, sighing, handed over the phone.

She opened up the list.

Ground Rules - Things We Need To Discuss

- Family
- Living Situation
- Intimacy
- Money
- Sleeping Situation
- Communication

- Date Night
- **How We Met Story**
- **How You Proposed Story**

Apparently, she also liked to cause trouble because she quickly checked her messages, which was more than one thing.

LUCAS SARACI

See you soon

I'll drop you off at my place.

I'll make dinner once I'm done at the clinic.

(~ 3~)♥

An emoji would have been easier, but he would have had to research how to do an elaborate “kiss face” to send it to her. Knowing he went through the trouble made her heart warm over. It was like the flowers—he put in the effort to try to make her feel unique and special.

She went to respond, but Estelle snatched the phone and pointed to the other side of the large studio.

“Look. There’s your surprise.”

It wasn’t Lucas, but it was the very next best thing.

“O.B.!” She ran across the studio and launched herself into her brother’s arms. “What are you doing here?”

He laughed, squeezing her into a hug. “Taking pictures. You’re not the only model in the family, you know.”

“You’re passable.”

“Whatever. Guel’s here too. He’s with Lilah.”

She released him. “It’s so good to see you. Is it just you, or did Sam and J.R. fly out with you?”

“I thought there’d be more nakedness around here, and I’ll be damned if I have my wife and child up here staring at dick. So, they’re at Lilah and Guel’s, probably knocked out. J.R. has a cold, so we’ve been staying up to watch him sleep.”

She laughed.

And they said she was the dramatic one.

“Is it the same cold Eli has?” she asked. “Carson told me Eli wasn’t feeling well, either.”

“We think so. It might have been that Big Cat Storytime team event we took them to.”

She gave him another tight hug, tears building in her eyes. “O.B., I’m really, really happy you’re here.”

Seeing her brother was a partially-perfect culmination to bring an end to the chaos. Lucas would round everything out, clipping away any tattered ends that remained.

“You sure you’re okay?” O.B. swiped at the corner of her eye. “Rough week?”

“Something like that.”

“How rough?”

“I’m eating, little brother.” It was what she called him, but he towered over her by more than a foot.

“Are you heading back to North Carolina after this?” he asked.

“I might stay in the area a little longer. Spend more time with Lilah.”

O.B. looked over her head. “Are you sure? She might not be able to find time to spend with you. You know how they like to do us.”

Raina turned around.

Miguel and Delilah headed toward them, hands clasped and smiling like Miguel hadn’t been in town virtually every weekend since that summer. Soon, he would leave for a stretch of road games, but that wasn’t for another couple of weeks.

“It’ll be nice to be nearby anyway,” she said. “Maybe I’ll stay at a hotel.”

O.B. pinched and stroked at the hair on his chin. “Hey, doesn’t Lilah’s professor live here?”

Places on her body pulsed that she didn’t want pulsing in front of her brother.

“What professor?”

“Dr. S.”

“Um,” she squinted, “yeah? I think he does live in Baltimore. Why?”

“You’re not slick, Raina.”

“I don’t understand.”

“How about answering two questions for me, then? Number one: why did

my phone ask me if I wanted to update your name to Raina E. Saraci in my contacts list?”

Shit.

She would have to change that back. If their folks found out she got married and didn't say a word, it would hurt them. Drunk or not, she hadn't included them in a significant event in her life.

“Two,” O.B. continued, “that’s him stepping off the elevator, isn’t it?”

She nearly broke an ankle turning around.

Lucas Saraci was again wearing scrubs, and there was so much she could do with him in scrubs, so much role-play to be considered. Honestly, he looked good in everything she'd seen him in so far. She could see them role-playing firefighter and “woman who thinks she smells gas as she leaves the shower but forgets to get dressed before she calls 911.”

“Raina!”

She looked up to find her conniving brother grinning from one ear to the other. “I’m sorry. I didn’t hear what you said.”

“I wonder why.”

“I’m going to say hi.”

“Why wouldn’t you? He came here for you.”

“No, he didn’t, and I changed my name as a dare. Delilah dared me to.”

“Okay, Raina.”

She and Lucas met in the middle of the room, coming to a stop in front of one another. Then he pulled her close, kissing her cheek before wrapping her in a hug.

“A few people here know we’re married,” he whispered. “It would be weird if I don’t at least hug you.”

She inhaled so much of his cologne it made her dizzy. “We need to add ‘greetings’ to the list.”

“Do you have a preference?”

“A kiss.”

“Be a good girl and say ‘please.’”

“Nope.”

He laughed. “By the way, your assistant is shooting daggers in our direction. Does she not like me?”

She peeled herself out of his hold. “They’re not for you. They’re for me. I’ve been a bad girl all week.”

“Oh?” His brows popped up. “Tell me more.”

“I’ll see you in a bit, Saraci,” she said, walking off. “Don’t leave without me.”

“I came here for you, Raina,” he called after her. “When I leave, you’re coming with me.”

* * *

The photoshoot with Miguel and her brother proved to be the perfect way to end the week, seamless and fun and fully clothed.

By the end of the day, everyone left with tired smiles, commenting on how they admired her relationship with Miguel and O.B.

Miguel and O.B. had been best friends since elementary school, and then Miguel moved in with their family during high school after a close family member of his was murdered. As normal as it was to everyone else for him and Delilah to end up together, they hid the relationship until it was accidentally revealed.

In a very telling way.

Miguel, Delilah, and O.B. left first, which gave her the freedom to hold Lucas’ hand as they exited the building.

They pulled out of the parking garage, and she waved to people who had no idea they wouldn’t see her again next year, regardless of what she promised. Hopefully, her mother would handle her “I’m retiring from modeling to pursue research full time” announcement gracefully and with understanding.

A baby, *her*, ended her mother’s modeling career, and she hoped she’d done enough to make up for taking a lifelong dream away from the woman who gave her life.

“Instead of taking me to your place, can I come to the clinic?” she asked. “I want to see you in action.”

He nodded. “Sure, but aren’t you tired?”

“Very.”

“Then let me take you home. You can see the clinic another time.”

“Lilah always talks so highly about you and the work you guys do. I want to see where you do that work.”

“Delilah always talks highly about me?”

“More often than she calls you a maniac.”

“Okay, that sounds more believable,” he said. “And I have some administrative tasks to handle, if that’s okay, and a couple of hours to kill. There’s a sofa in my office if you need to take a nap.”

“A nap,” she yawned, “sounds great.”

Chapter Eleven

Lucas peered over the top of his monitor screen just as Raina turned on the sofa, tucking his blazer tighter around her.

Blankets.

His office needed blankets.

Usually, when he slept in his office, he was too tired to care about needing covers. There was the option of providing her with his body heat, but being in the same room was challenging enough; she still had on the leggings and sports bra from the final photo shoot underneath her jacket, and the pink fabric fit her like melted butter. He wanted to lie next to her, holding her against him while burying his “*d-nose*” in her “*p-hair*.”

Things were going well.

They were being nice to each other.

Twice now, she’d used a term of endearment when referring to him. The first ‘baby,’ he could have blamed on sleep, but then she did it again. Granted, it was via text, but it was in the same breath where she’d called him her hubby, and text communication had grown on him.

This could work.

A year from now, they could still be married. Rather than him sitting in his office with her asleep across the room, they would be packing for the semi-annual trip they started taking together. Trips with Raina would prove far more enjoyable than going alone or with colleagues.

Raina turned again.

He left the desk, fetched a clean pair of scrubs from the office’s small linen closet, and walked it over to the sofa, his muscles tensing for a fight as he sat on the edge of the cushion.

“Raina, you’re cold. Let me help you put these on.”

She curled into a ball. “I’m not cold.”

“Then, wake up. You snore like a walrus, and I can’t get any work done.”

She sat up, yawning and stretching, and he wondered whether it was lewd to be her husband yet want her as much as he did.

“I know,” she said. “I snore like a chainsaw, and I sleep like I have abandonment issues. Are you ready to file the annulment paperwork?”

He held up the scrubs. “I’m ready to get you warm. Trust me, we know how cold we keep this place. I’ve gotten used to it, but your body can barely generate enough heat to regulate a smurf’s internal temperature.”

She glared at him through narrowed eyes.

He grinned.

The grin fell when she went from the sofa cushions to his lap and set her head on his shoulder. Instead of wrapping her arms around him, she slid them under his scrubs, her palms like ice along his spinal column.

The ice didn’t last long against his skin. Not after she ran her nose along the side of his chin and placed a kiss in the notch where his chin met his neck. The notch that burned like acid whenever he ate ripe fruit.

“You really think this affects me?” he asked, and the sky darkened through the window, no doubt for a lighting storm.

“I can feel your heartbeat,” she said.

“It’s sinus tachycardia.”

“And why does my husband, all of a sudden, have a rapid heartbeat?”

She flicked the same spot with her tongue, and his dick popped up. There was nowhere for it to hide, which meant she felt every inch, so he waited for her to climb off his lap.

But this was Raina.

Raina was his sweet, his sour.

So, she licked again and latched onto the spot on his neck, sucking until he went from a normal erection to steel that could prop up a two-story house.

She straddled him, and he must have dropped the scrubs at some point because his hands were on her ass, scrubs-less.

“Saraci?” She nipped, licked, and sucked. “Are you not attracted to me?”

He could have not eaten for days, and someone offered him food, and he still would shove it aside to devour Raina instead.

Not attracted to her?

Her leggings and his scrubs separated them, but he was so hard, it felt as

though he was partially inside her.

Seconds before he would have made a noise of defeat, a groaning sigh, he swallowed it. His neck was not supposed to be an erogenous zone. At this point in his life, he'd assumed he'd located all his hot spots, and his neck wasn't one he'd identified before today.

"I won't beg you, Saraci." She trailed kisses underneath his chin and placed one right below his bottom lip. "You might as well give in."

Did she own him?

Yes.

Did she know that?

Probably.

Did that mean he would give in?

Also, probably.

She looked up at him, the picture of pure fake innocence, trying to hide an obvious smug grin.

With his breaths coming in as fast as they were, the room would soon start to spin, so he set her on her back and unzipped the jacket. She didn't try to stop him, didn't look away or ask him what he was doing. And he'd had an idea of what he was doing until the sports bra came down, and a pair of beautiful, mocha-tipped breasts stared back at him.

"When was the last time you had sex?" she asked.

"Almost two years ago." He took one breast in his hand, gently squeezed. "Before I met you. It was with my ex, and it was a one-time thing."

Maybe thoughts of Emmaline would calm his desire. Even when they were together, it had been more of a relationship where she would have to be in his presence, touching him, for him to get an erection.

Raina's nipple hardened against his palm, and if it could, his dick would have laughed at him. Emmaline wasn't powerful enough to dissolve Raina. Raina's effect on him extended past state lines and country borders.

"You?" he asked.

"I have since we met," she said.

He looked up. "Who was it?"

"I'm joking."

"You better be."

"I am. It's been a few years. My career is very demanding, and I ran into this egomaniac in Greece a while back. After that, I haven't been able to think about being with anyone else."

Sounded like his exact situation.

Bending his head, he covered her areola with his mouth, massaging her lush breast, and she arched up off the cushions like a feline.

“Mmm.” He flicked her nipple with the tip of his tongue. “Why do you taste like this?”

“Like w—”

He sucked.

She arched further.

“Why are you sweet, Rai?” He moved to the other breast and lightly rolled the nipple between his teeth. “How are you sweet? I don’t understand.”

“You said you’d confirm my sweetness with ‘gustation,’” she pointed out. “The science of taste.”

“Yes, I know, but I wasn’t talking about your breasts.”

Each time he sucked, she arched.

Whenever he licked, she shuddered.

“Can I take these off, Rai?” He hooked his fingers inside the waistband of her leggings while kissing a trail up her sternum to the hollow of her throat. “Tell me you want me to touch you.”

“I want you to touch me, Lucas.”

He pulled the leggings, and her panties, off over her ankles, set them aside, and untied the string at the front of his scrubs.

“Beg me to fuck you, Rai.”

“I—”

A knock sounded on the door.

“Who is it?” he growled.

“It’s, uh, Janet, Dr. Saraci.”

Janet, the head nurse.

If Janet was looking for him, that meant he had work to do. After all, he was at work. Eventually, there would have been work to do, but more critical matters lay half-naked before him.

He stroked between Raina’s legs with his thumb. “Yes, Janet?”

“The first set of patients are here,” Janet said. “No sign of Ozzie, though.”

As he stroked, Raina purred into the quiet room. Then, in consolation, he kissed one dark nipple, then the other.

“Okay, Janet. I’ll be right out.”

First, he would need to clean up a bit. Raina turned him on so much that fluid leaked from his tip, which hadn’t happened since he was in high school.

He eased away from her and waited.

She didn't beg.

"I'll go get cleaned up, sweetheart." He kissed her soft mouth and then rose onto feet that weren't as steady as he'd anticipated. "I brought you scrubs to put on over your clothes that might help with the cold. Oh, and feel free to tour the clinic when you wake up. Everyone here knows you're my wife, so they'll leave you alone."

She nodded. "Okay."

He leaned down and kissed her again.

And again.

Sheer willpower stopped him from going further.

"Do you want me to wait here for you?" she asked.

"If you want to." He pulled the scrub top off over his head. "It doesn't matter. I'll find you wherever you are."

After two more kisses, and a long lick of her lips, he changed in the office's bathroom and headed to tend to his patients.

* * *

The man he'd been hoping to see waited in the exam room, his last patient for the day. His most reluctant client, Osman, sat with his shoulders hunched, his face and head covered in curly, silver-black hair. Usually, they had a standing appointment every two weeks, but it had been over two months since they last saw each other.

Lucas stood in front of the door, arms folded. "Ozzie, my man. It's good to see you. Do me a favor and let me see you walk around a bit?"

Ozzie walked from one end of the room to the other, clearly trying to hide a limp. However, any conversation about a hip replacement usually ended with Ozzie refusing to follow up with his appointments because no one was going to "cut" him "open."

"Good, good. That hip still bothering you?"

Ozzie mumbled a response and climbed onto the exam table. They'd been meeting for years, and although there could sometimes be long breaks between those meetings, he understood the older man's mumbles about as well as his plain language.

They first started meeting under an expressway. A year later, he

convinced Ozzie to come to the clinic. The hope was to eventually get Ozzie set up in a rehab shelter, but the absolute dream was to reunite him with his family.

Ozzie mumbled a question.

“I can’t complain,” Lucas said. He held up his left hand. “And yes, I did. You noticed that very quickly.”

Ozzie mumbled something else.

“I’ll have you meet her. Maybe you can tell her that.” He retrieved a light from his pocket. “Now, you’re taking your meds, right?”

Ozzie grunted.

“And what about the hallucinations?” He checked both eyes, timing Ozzie’s breaths at the same time. “Are they still happening?”

“No.”

“When did they stop? Do you remember?”

“Little after our last appointment.”

“So that’s, what? About a month?” He checked Ozzie’s joints and noted that the whites of his eyes were turning yellow. “Still drinking?”

A series of mumbling followed.

“We met over a year ago, at a conference,” Lucas said. “Lie back for me, Ozzie?”

As he continued the physical examination, including checking Ozzie’s hair for fleas or lice, he spotted Raina through the window in the door. Their eyes met, and he held her gaze for a few heartbeats before turning all his attention back to his patient.

“Is that her?” Ozzie asked.

Lucas nodded. “Yes, that’s my wife.”

“Beautiful.”

“Very beautiful. Now, how’s the chest pain?”

“Better.”

“Are you still smoking?”

“Mmm.”

“Ozzie, your father died of a heart attack, and you told me your grandfather died of a heart attack. Both were smokers. Based on everything we’ve discussed, and your labs from last time, you’re what we could consider high risk.” He rolled a stool near the exam table and took a seat. “There’s medication that can help lower your cardiovascular risk. That means—”

Ozzie slapped the air. “I know what it means, son. I don’t like

medication.”

“I remember.”

“The body wasn’t made for medication.”

“Nor was it made for forty-hour workweeks, but how many of us are doing that? It’s about adaptation. Helping you live as optimally as possible in your current circumstances. Remember what you told me? About wanting to reconnect with your kids? Meet your grandchildren? How important is that goal to you?”

Ozzie’s head fell. “My kids don’t want to see me.”

“I’m an adult, and I still miss my mother and father.”

“That’s different.”

“How?”

“You’re a good boy.”

Lucas laughed. “Not always.”

“If I do what you’re asking,” tears filled Ozzie’s eyes, his throat bobbing, “I might be able to live longer?”

“Yes. These changes can help lower your mortality risk. You told me that you don’t like being confined. You don’t like walls. If you like how you live, the least I can do is find a way to help you do so safely.”

The tears spilled onto his cheeks. “Lucas, why are you helping me?”

Lucas patted him on the shoulder. “Because you need the help, and I can provide it. Plus, I’m a nice guy. If you ask my wife, she might say differently, but I stand by what I said.”

Ozzie laughed.

“There’s a program that can help with the smoking *and* the alcohol. I can refer you, but it’s not free. If you go, I’ll cover the cost myself.”

Ozzie waved away the offer. “No.”

“Osman, come on. I want you to get better, and smoking and drinking, combined with your health history, drastically increases your risk of death.”

Ozzie snorted.

Lucas folded his arms over his chest, and a two-minute silent stand-off followed.

“Where is the program?”

They finished the visit, and he walked him to the door where Janet waited. Most of their more disadvantaged patients were compliant despite their situations—mental health, physical capabilities, lifestyle—but had it been legal to tag Ozzie to keep track of him, he would have done so at their

first visit.

Ozzie and Janet started down the hall. Raina walked toward them from the other side, and Lucas watched, his body partially hidden by the exam room doorway.

It wasn't fair to compare Raina to Emmaline, and it wasn't like Emmaline had all bad traits and no good qualities, but he couldn't help it. When he wasn't looking, he wanted to see who Raina was.

Who she became.

Ozzie said something that made her laugh and nod while playing with the ring on her finger.

"You could say it was," she said.

He didn't hear what Ozzie replied, but Raina laughed again and gently gripped Ozzie's wrist. Then they continued in opposite directions, Raina tossing, "I'll be sure to" over her shoulder.

Lucas dipped inside the exam room and went to the computer in the corner, typing up notes he prayed resembled the English alphabet when someone else looked them over.

Raina's face appeared in the doorway. "A man named Ozzie told me to tell you that I'm much too beautiful to be your wife."

He rolled his eyes. "Ozzie's a flirt."

She entered the room and flopped into a chair tucked against the wall on the other side. She was tired, but he'd already offered to take her back to his place. One refusal was all he would accept, as the alternative was staying close to him.

"Did you sleep?" he asked.

She covered a yawn. "A little. It was harder to sleep once you left, though."

"Did you miss me?"

"Maybe."

Concentrating harder than he had on his board exams, he finished typing Ozzie's notes and locked the computer.

"So, dinner?" he asked.

"Are you still cooking?"

"Yes. Why?"

"It's late. It's Friday. You've been going all day. Let's order something and take it home. You can cook for me another time when you've had what I'm sure is more than a few hours' worth of sleep."

He wanted to cook for her, but she was right. He'd been at it all day and would be working at the clinic the entire weekend, which he did once a month. Then, cumulative exams were next week, and the thought alone made him want to escape to Switzerland and change his name.

"Chickpea curry sound good?" he asked.

She nodded. "Sounds amazing."

"By the way," he motioned around, "what do you think of the clinic?"

"It's amazing. Honestly, I was expecting something smaller, simpler, but there's Family Medicine, a Women's Health Department, Pediatrics, an on-site pharmacy. Even a dental clinic."

"It used to be simpler, back when I first started working here." As a thirteen-year-old custodian who'd had no idea how his life was about to change. "Over the years, between grants and private funding sources, it's become the wonder you see here today."

"My father's company has been investing more in healthcare," she said. "Is that something you'd be interested in, you think?"

Before the question left her mouth, he was already thinking about getting a PET scanner and updating the clinic's ultrasound technology. It was adequate but outdated. Extra money could also mean adding an on-site lab and behavioral health department.

"Definitely, but I don't want anyone to cry favoritism if he gives money to your husband's wee little community clinic."

She cocked her head to the side. "Like he'd care."

He laughed.

"I'll talk to him, tell him about all the good you do for the community... and for me." She wiggled her eyebrows. "But first, let's go get some grub. Wifey's hungry."

"I can hear your stomach rumbling from over here," he said, rising to his feet. "And you want me to meet your father?"

"He'd like you."

"Oh." His face warmed. "Good to know."

He reached out to help her up, but she went limp, like a rag doll, against the chair.

"Please, Lucas. I'm so tired." She reached for him, her voice weaker than the password his mother used for the parental controls on their first family computer—*password*.

Sighing, he scooped her up into his arms. "You know, that sounded a

whole lot like begging.”

“Does that mean you’ll kiss me?”

“Should I?”

She tilted her chin. “Yes.”

He kissed her, although he wanted to kiss her somewhere else, and it probably wasn’t the pair of lips she had in mind.

Chapter Twelve

“Rai, we’re here.”

Raina blinked.

Dark roads, bright headlights, and gradually uncongested highways had become a well-lit basement parking garage stocked with high-end luxury vehicles.

“Delilah used to live in this building.” She pointed to a space a few rows down. “Those were her two spots. She started with one, and then Miguel started coming up here regularly.”

Lucas opened his door. “She’s the first medical student I’ve ever shared a residential location with. If it happens again, I’m leaving the state.”

He exited the car.

She did the same, and he stopped in the middle of rounding the front bumper as if he’d been coming around to open her door. It was a chivalrous gesture, and she appreciated his thoughtfulness, but she’d been on the go since she was eighteen.

He rerouted to the trunk. “Go on up. I’ll wait for Delilah. I asked her to bring your things as discreetly as possible.”

It wouldn’t matter.

Miguel, her siblings, and her sister-in-law all suspected she had feelings for Lucas. J.R., barely a year old, probably did as well.

“Use the private elevator,” he added. “I added the information to our notes file. You already have access.”

“So, what you’re telling me is, Delilah knows about us,” she said.

“Sort of.”

“Does she know we’re married?”

“Of course not.”

She raised an eyebrow.

“Fine. Yes, I told her, but do you know how much more challenging this will be if at least one other person doesn’t know? Especially Delilah.”

“You’re not wrong, there.” She collected the bags she’d accumulated all week from the backseat, gifts from companies and designers filled with the outfits she’d worn today, goodies, and treats she was supposed to share for the next month via social media.

Lucas stopped her with a hand. “I’ll get those. You take the food upstairs.” He motioned to the building. “Go and get off your feet. You’ve been working hard all week.”

“So have you.”

“Then, once I’m done down here, I’ll come up and we’ll de-stress together.”

“And exactly how would we do that?”

He shrugged. “I’m sure we’ll figure something out.”

She headed for the elevator, shaking her head and walking backward until something hard and soft collided with her back. Then she heard an “Oof” followed by a feminine, “I’m so sorry.”

She turned around.

A woman wearing a matching workout set removed a pair of over-the-ear headphones. A sweatband obscured her hairline, and she’d pulled her dark hair back into a thick ponytail.

The woman started to say something to her but then glanced across the parking garage. Her demeanor changed, going from casual and relaxed to fidgety.

Raina followed her gaze, and she noticed Lucas meet the woman’s eyes for a millisecond before he looked away.

The woman headed in Lucas’ direction, determination in her steps. Raina watched, uninterested in continuing to the elevators until she better grasped the weird energy between the dark-haired beauty and her husband of not even two weeks.

Did she have a right to be jealous?

They were married, but did she?

Obviously, he wanted to sleep with her, but that didn’t mean his feelings for her went any deeper than how far he could sink inside her body. That could have been the motive behind the three-month relationship—unimpeded

access to fulfill his fantasies of a ride on the Chocolate Express.

The woman stopped in front of Lucas, and he shoved his hand in the pocket of his scrubs.

His ring hand.

He seemed as if he was mildly tense but doing his best to come off as polite. On the other hand, the woman made small motions toward him, leaning and tipping as she gestured or laughed.

Raina set down her bags and whipped out her phone.

RAINA E. SARACI

Cheating on me already?

He retrieved his phone from his pocket, smiled at the screen, and then tapped out a response.

MY LUCAS

Go upstairs.

RAINA E. SARACI

So you two can get it on in the parking garage?

MY LUCAS

The only person I want to “get it on” with is you, my dear jealous wife.

RAINA E. SARACI

She's pretty.

MY LUCAS

To me, you're gorgeous.

No competition.

RAINA E. SARACI

Still jealous.

MY LUCAS

That's strike one, Mrs. Saraci.

RAINA E. SARACI

Three strikes and I'm out?

MY LUCAS

No ma'am.

Three strikes and I'm in.

She hurried to the elevator bay, followed his directions in their shared file,
and the elevator opened directly into his unit,

His condo was exactly how she'd pictured it:

Immaculate.

Minimal decor.

Black, white, and modern.

There were roughly a dozen windows in the front room alone, most of which faced the harbor. It didn't look entirely like a bachelor pad, but something about it screamed, "A physician lives here."

As she removed her shoes, she noticed a Post-It stuck to the entryway closet door.

Raina,

The slippers next to mine are yours. The miniature purple ones that could fit a dachshund. I've only ever dated women above five-foot-eight. Now I'm married to Mrs. Mighty Mouse.

How did you trap me?

Yours,

- Dr. Saraci

Rolling her eyes and smiling so hard it hurt her ears, she shoved her feet into the slippers, placed the food on the kitchen counter, and started a mini, self-guided tour.

Except for the kitchen backsplash, all the walls were white with wood paneling. The floors were also wood, although an enormous area rug separated the living and dining areas. There was even a fireplace, and she pictured Lucas sitting on the sofa, one leg perched on the cushions, sipping a glass of wine while reading medical literature.

Everything was on one floor, so she poked her head inside a couple of doors, one of which was an office, and the other was a multipurpose room with a Murphy bed. There was also another bathroom done in beige, brassy-gold, white, and wood.

At the end of the hallway, she came to the largest bedroom in the condo, which boasted tall windows and an oversized bed. She found that she liked that the bed was unmade, and she pictured Lucas getting up in the mornings and tossing his legs over the side, taking a deep breath before starting his day.

This room experimented more with color, though just barely. There were pops of blue and yellow and faux greenery, all of which tied in with the artwork above the headboard.

The boldest she'd gone at her own place was blush. After dealing with people all day, sometimes multiple days in a row, the last thing she wanted was to be overwhelmed by magenta walls and a turquoise duvet cover.

"We can't live here." She surveyed the room, peering into the large en suite bathroom. "We need neutral ground. Here, he has too much of an upper hand."

On the bathroom mirror, she spotted another Post-It.

Honestly, I don't have anything to write. I just like leaving you notes. Continue with your tour. You're too nosy not to tour.

:-)

Yours,

-Dr. Saraci

If she smiled any wider, something would tear. Dr. Ego was, apparently, adorable as hell.

"Well played, Saraci."

"Who are you talking to?"

She turned around to find him standing in the doorway with all her bags and the flowers wrapped in one giant bouquet. Stuff she would have struggled with, he carried with ease.

"No one," she said. "Need help?"

"You can take these." He handed her the flowers. "I'll arrange everything else in here."

"This room?"

"Yes. It's ours."

"You don't have a guest room?"

"I do, but I don't have a guest." He lowered the suitcase handle, locked it in place, and then picked it up with one hand. "But if you want me to put

them in a guest room, I will.”

It was a suitcase handle.

There she was, getting hot over how he gripped a suitcase handle. Over taut forearms and veins, large hands and long fingers.

“No, it’s fine.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, then. I’ll get these situated in here. There are vases in the kitchen cabinet next to the sink, on the bottom.”

She nodded and disappeared down a hallway.

They *could not* live here.

At his place, he had too much power. It would be too easy to feed his ego. Here, she would willingly let him lock her in a room, her arms and legs tied to the bed posts, for the sole purpose of providing him pleasure in any form, whenever he wanted it.

She arranged the flowers in a vase, surprised they’d managed to live this long. Just as she was finishing up, Lucas joined her in the front room, the scrubs exchanged for a Georgetown University School of Medicine T-shirt and a pair of sweatpants.

Gray sweatpants.

The man was playing dirty.

“It” peeked with every step he took, the thick gray outline teasing her and a single word running through her mind, like a ticking clock:

Dick-dick, Dick-dick, Dick-dick

All she had to fight gray sweatpants and a dick print was a sports bra that matched her leggings, but the swoosh sitting right in the middle of her breasts helped matters.

“You didn’t go to Hopkins for medical school?” she asked.

He looked down at her, his eyes at least three shades darker. “No.”

“How did you end up teaching—”

“When you model clothes like these,” he dragged his gaze the entire length of her body, “are they directly from the company, or are they altered to fit you?”

“These are directly from the company. They just happen to fit me well. Probably because of the stretch.” She turned around. “Why? Do they look

bad?”

“You know they don’t.”

“I have to ask, Mr. Dick Print. We’re both adults here. I know what you’re doing.”

He spun her around, picked her up, and set her on the island countertop. Then he dipped his head and dropped his voice so low she wondered whether he genuinely wanted her to hear him.

“Mrs. Saraci, I want you.”

She traced his bottom lip with her thumb. “How much?”

“It cannot be quantified.”

“That’s such a Lucas answer.”

“Beg me, Raina.” He kissed her nose, the space between her eyebrows. “Put us both out of our misery and beg me.”

“I don’t beg.”

“It’s never too late to try something new.”

“I’m not even sure what I’d be begging for. A kiss? For you to make love to me?”

“All of the above.”

There was no way they would be able to hold out for much longer, especially after she brought up their proposition about living together.

“I missed you,” she whispered. “When I was in North Carolina, I missed you.”

He brushed her cheek with his. “Can you say that one more time for me?”

“I missed you, Lucas.”

He shuddered. “Mmm. And I missed you, Rai.”

Sighing, he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her as close to him as she could get. She slid her hands underneath his T-shirt to feel the warm skin on his back against her fingertips. Then he pulled her off the island, and she locked her legs around his middle.

“Don’t stop me, okay?” she requested, seconds before pressing her lips to his.

He groaned.

She answered with a breathy one of her own, unable to recall the last time something felt more natural. Everything was as right as right could get—the softness of his lips, the way they felt moving with hers, the hungry flicks of his tongue, how it felt to be held by him.

Kissing Lucas fulfilled every ache and need and was about more than

lips. It was his breath brushing the space beneath her nose, the quiet sounds in his throat, his hands stroking her skin, and the warmth of his skin beneath her palms.

Their lips came apart like magnets, and she found herself looking down into eyes like glass marbles.

Eventually, he released her.

She could have held on for a day or two longer, but she unfolded her legs and let him set her on her feet.

“I’m going to change out of these into something softer.” She pointed at the hallway. “And freshen up.”

After only a few minutes in this man’s arms, she was wetter than the harbor outside. Sexual attraction and tension were there, but it was beginning to dawn on her that it might not be enough.

He’d pursued her.

He’d told her, point blank, that he wanted her to have his last name because he would be hers one day. It didn’t sit well with her that those might have been the words of a man whose only desire was to have sex with her and get her out of his system.

But then there were the flowers.

And the texts.

The lunch.

The ring on her finger.

Those had to mean something.

He nodded. “Okay. I’ll get the food ready.”

To walk off, she had to physically peel her feet off the ground. And, in the reflection of the windows, she saw him scan her body with a slow shake of his head before he headed to the kitchen.

Chapter Thirteen

She'd changed into a pair of comfortable-looking cotton pants and a long-sleeved T-shirt, neither of which did much to hinder Lucas' memories. His body, arms, and fingers would never forget what she felt like pressed against him. His mouth and neck would hold on to the feeling of her lips and tongue for centuries.

"Raina? The food's ready."

She looked up from where she'd been flipping through one of the books he kept stacked on the coffee table. Where more refined homeowners might have kept decorative books about major cities, fashion, or food, he had medical textbooks.

Raina set the book down, lining it up perfectly with the others. "Medical physiology. Believe it or not, I could sit there and read that thing from cover to cover."

"I believe it," he said.

She joined him at the glass-top dining table and took a seat, and he set her carton of spiced, golden-orange chickpeas, spinach, and steamed rice in front of her. Had he more energy, he would have transferred everything to real bowls, but the quicker they ate, the quicker they could go to bed. They were both tired, and he enjoyed having her next to him.

"So, Dr. Saraci, what are some of your favorite foods from childhood?" she asked.

That answer, he didn't need to think about.

"Döner kebab," he said, taking his seat. "That's meat cooked on a rotisserie spit and then shaved down. I like mine in a dürüm, a type of flatbread, and my mother would add shredded cabbage, carrots, cucumbers..."

so good.”

“Kind of like shawarma.” She took a bite of her food and moaned, head bobbing. “Wow. This is *good*, Saraci. We’re going to have to go here sometime. Maybe on one of our date nights? Which is one of the things we’re supposed to discuss.”

“What about Saturdays? I only work one Saturday out of the month, and I rarely have to do emergency surgeries.”

She nodded. “Okay. Saturdays.”

“Let’s go back a moment.” He’d told her a little about his background. Now, he wanted to learn more about hers. “Your mother’s from Senegal. Did you grow up surrounded by the culture?”

“Not really. My mother moved here in her late teens and didn’t carry on much of the traditions outside of the food. It’s very meat-heavy, so for a while, my mother felt like I was departing from my roots when I went vegetarian when I could subsist on Senegalese or Senegambian rice alone. She didn’t give me the cooking gene, though.”

“You can’t cook?”

“I can follow a recipe.”

“We can build on that.”

She grinned. “I try to incorporate traditional elements where possible, but most of what I learned came from research. I did a shoot where I wore a gris-gris, which is like a charm or an amulet commonly worn around the neck. Although many, if not most, Senegalese people are Muslim, you can see African influences interwoven within their faith. Like healers, spirit guides, diviners...”

His ears perked up. “Most people from Senegal are Muslim? I grew up Muslim.”

“Because of my father, we went to Baptist churches. We didn’t grow up of Islamic faith.” With each bite she took, she sighed as if it was the best thing she’d eaten in a while. “What about you? Was your family more traditional?”

“Both my parents were Muslim, but my mother was more traditional,” he shared. “Then me and my siblings shifted away from organized religion as we grew older.”

Yet, he was the only one shunned for it.

At first, he’d resented his mother for the way she’d treated him, but as he grew older, he saw how his father’s absence changed her. How much she’d

needed to hold tight to her faith to keep her head on straight. The only person in his family who still practiced was his brother Jonathan, and compared to their mother's *Ihsan* level of faith, Jonathan was still in Islamic faith "preschool."

"What about now?" Raina asked.

"Now?" He shrugged. "I'm a doctor. The first part of my life was governed by faith. This part is governed by medicine and science. I'm excited to see what the future holds."

For all they knew, the next phase of his life would revolve around being a husband.

Or a father.

If he wanted children.

Which he didn't.

Once they were finished eating, he tossed their cartons in the trash, poured two glasses of wine, and they moved to the living room sofa.

He sat first, and although he'd told her, only moments before, that his family had mostly shied away from organized religion, a blip of something returned when she sat beside him.

"Now, for the nitty gritty," she said. "Our list."

He spread his arm along the back of the chair, behind her head. "We have all weekend to tackle our list."

"There are some things I want to work out now, though." She took a sip from her glass. "Number one? Sex. I say we leave it off the table."

"I'm fine with that. Sex on the table might be awkward, anyway. I think we'll fare just fine with a bed. Maybe this sofa. Kitchen countertops. The car. The elevator. My office."

"Exactly. It's the first thing I thought when I saw it. It's too small."

"Let's buy a bigger table, then."

She touched her glass to his. "That's solved. Next is our living situation. I propose that, for us to get the full effect of being married, we live together."

"I don't m—"

"But not here."

"You don't like my place?" he asked.

"No, it's beautiful. Our design styles are very similar—quiet, subdued, made for reducing tension. But living here gives you too much advantage. Here, we won't achieve balance."

"To be honest, I can't exactly leave the area right now."

She waved a hand. “Oh, I know. I wouldn’t be that selfish. My schedule’s way more flexible, so I’ll move here for the next few months to be with you.”

He wiped away a smile with a scrub of his chin. “So you want to buy something? Depending upon how long closing takes, that could end up being the entire agreement.”

“Miguel bought a house.”

“He and Delilah are moving already?”

“No, and prepare yourself for what I’m about to say next.” She took another sip from her glass, eyes locked with his. “Okay, so when he and Delilah were looking for a new place, she couldn’t decide between another condo or a house.”

“Don’t tell me he bought both.”

“That’s exactly what he did. You see, Miguel is sweet. Super sweet. He’s always been that way, which is why he got...picked on, you could say, as a child by some of his more cruel family members. That sweet guy? He fell in love with Delilah. You know my sister. Those two will spend the rest of their lives bending over backward to try to make the other happy.”

“Is that what you want?” He did well for himself but didn’t make Miguel’s kind of money—nine figures with the stroke of a pen.

Still, he was willing to do whatever he could to make her happy, outside of buying her multiple residences to choose from.

“Our relationship’s not exactly close to theirs,” she explained. “They have nearly a lifetime of friendship to fall back on. You and I? You could say that we’re undergoing a weird dating experiment.”

“Then maybe it’s a good thing the chapel had that prenup add-on discount special,” he said. “I am known to be a gold-digger.”

Bubbling with laughter, she finished her wine, and he took the glasses to the kitchen before reclaiming his spot next to her.

She leaned against his side, and while they didn’t have a friendship as solid as Delilah’s and Miguel’s to fall back on, they had something. No one could convince him they didn’t have something.

All she had to do was touch him.

Look at him.

Smile at him.

Talk to him.

Many people built relationships without having over a decades’ worth of friendship as the relationship’s foundation. He wanted to know what they

could have, what they could create if they both believed in working toward a future together.

He'd liked Emmaline. In fact, he'd liked all of his exes, but none of them ever made his heart beat.

Not like this.

"The house is still up for sale," she continued. "I'll ask Guel if we can stay there for a few months."

"Won't he ask why we'll be living together?"

"Do you honestly think Delilah hasn't told him about our Vegas slip-up?"

It wasn't a slip-up on his part.

"When can we go see it?" he asked.

"Probably before the end of the weekend."

"And after that?"

"I have to go back to North Carolina to tie up some loose ends, but I can come back no later than...Thursday."

He shook his head. "Tuesday."

"Saraci, why do you always argue with me about this? Can you not live without me or something?"

It wasn't that he couldn't live without her. After all, he'd lived without a partner for the last couple of years. But if he had the choice to have her with him, it was the choice he would always make. Losing people was something he was used to, but it wasn't something he ever wanted to *get* used to.

"Wednesday, then," she said.

"Is it furnished?"

"I'm not sure."

"I guess we can figure that out as we go." He leaned further into the cushions. "What's next on the list?"

"Money."

"What about it?"

"Say it's not furnished."

"Then I'll get furniture."

"We will."

"What else?"

"We'll circle back to that," she said. "I think we've already figured out the sleeping situation. As long as you're not opposed to the idea, and seeing how we've already slept beside one another, we can share a bed."

"Will you behave if we do?"

“I don’t intend to.”

“Good.”

She yawned. “How’d we meet?”

“That can stay the same. In Greece at a genetics conference.”

“When did we start dating?”

“Shortly after that. You were so impressed by how I approached you in Athens, you couldn’t help but throw yourself at my feet.”

She snorted, eyes closing. “I’m not agreeing to that.”

“How about,” he wrapped an arm around her, “we discussed the basics of epigenetics, and our conversation lasted far into the night. I fell in love with you when you started talking about regulating gene expression. You could even say my love genes turned on because I met you.”

She burst out laughing. “Epic. I love it. How’d you propose, then? I can’t wait to hear this.”

“I hired a pilot to write ‘Raina, will you marry me and make me the happiest man the world has ever seen?’ in the sky.”

“You know they charge by the letter, right?” She yawned again, settling further against him. “Say we did date and fall in love. How do you think you would have proposed?”

“I’d invite you to a conference,” he began. “I’d tell you I had this huge presentation and needed your support. Then you’d show up, and everything would start as if I legitimately had a topic to talk about. Then, I’d segue into how much my life’s changed since I met you. How I can’t explain the way you make me feel.”

“That’s those love genes turning on again.”

“But that story won’t work. A room full of people means witnesses, and we’d have none.”

“True.” She hugged his midsection, locking her fingers just above his hip. “How about, on a night just like this one, after having dinner and a glass of wine, I was about to fall asleep with your arm around me. We’ve done this countless times, so there was nothing special about it. Nothing unique. However, that was the moment you knew. The moment you realized how much you wanted many more nights *just* like this one.”

“So I asked you to spell my last name.”

“S-A-R-A-C-I.”

“And then I told you, if you’ll have me, it’s yours.” He kissed the top of her head. “That’ll work, I think.”

She didn't respond.

He looked down and found himself doing the same thing he always did whenever he looked at her; he tried to figure out what was different. Why he liked her the way so much that it was another thing that couldn't be quantified.

"Maybe, instead of my demon woman, I should call you my sorceress." He buried his nose in her hair and inhaled. "You were tired, weren't you?"

The doorbell rang.

He didn't stir.

She moaned. "Don't you have to get that?"

"They'll go away."

"Who is it?"

"I don't care."

The doorbell chimed again.

"Saraci..." She snuggled against his shoulder. "I don't think they're going away. Who is it? Your weekend hookup? Is she at the door wearing a trench coat with lingerie underneath? Is it the woman from the parking garage?"

"I'll be right back."

She exchanged his frame for the sofa arm. "Put a sock on the bedroom door, so I'll know not to enter."

On the way to the front door, he checked his phone. On the camera, Emmaline stood wearing a form-fitting top and jeans that hugged her body. Instead of back in a ponytail, her hair framed her face.

Emmaline was curvy in her own right; he loved curves and the places they created on a woman's body for his hands, and he never deviated from that. Emmaline and Raina's shapes were vastly different, however.

Raina, with Emmaline's body, could do him in. Emmaline with Raina's body was still Emmaline.

He opened the door.

She waved. "Hey, Luke."

Each time she called him Luke, it reminded him of Khalid. Back in school, the names "Luke" and "Kyle" were, at first, inside jokes. Eventually, it became what they encouraged people to call them. Once he started going by Luke, his last name no longer mattered, and his features became "Mediterranean."

"Hi, Em. Everything okay?"

“Yeah, yeah.” She nodded. “Can I come in?”

“I’m not alone at the moment.”

“Oh. I see.” She took a half-step backward. “Is it...her?”

“It is.”

“I see things worked out.”

“Better than I thought they would.”

She pushed up onto the balls of her feet. “I’ll check in with you at work, then. I had a question about us possibly doing a combined surgery for an extensive tracheal resection. I’ll be working on the intrathoracic portion, but I’ll need you for the neck portion.”

Even before their relationship, they never discussed work after hours. “Of course, Em,” he said. “We’ll get together to go over the details.”

“Well then,” she clapped, her palms loudly smacking together, “that was it. Have a good night.”

“You too.”

He waited until she was gone before he closed the door and returned to find Raina sitting up, eyes closed and swaying like a pendulum. Smiling, he guided her to the bedroom.

Long pants and a long-sleeved shirt were overkill to sleep in, so he coaxed her onto the bed and stripped her down to her underwear. Next, he went through her bag and found nothing close to resembling sleepwear.

“Do you sleep naked or something?” He held up a T-shirt that couldn’t possibly hang farther than the bottoms of her breasts. “Yeah, you won’t be wearing this anywhere but at home for the next three months.”

“Is it yellow?” she mumbled.

“Yes.”

“It’s a sleep shirt. I usually wear it with the gray shorts with white trim on the bottom.”

He found the shorts in question. “Raina, these are panties.”

“They’re shorts.”

“I’m only putting these on because you’re sleeping next to me.”

He slid on the shorts first. Then, as he sat her up to pull the shirt on over her head, she reached back and unhooked her bra. The bra wasted no time falling to her lap.

“Being naked’s not a big deal to me,” she said. “I’ve been naked in front of dozens of people.”

He frowned. “*What* people?”

“For work.”

With her breasts on display, all he had to do now was maintain his distance and keep his tongue in his mouth, which would be easier if she stopped touching them.

She cupped the doughy orbs and gave them a gentle squeeze. “I like my body. I didn’t always. It never looked right. My brother had to talk me out of countless surgeries. He’d say, ‘Raina, if you want to get plastic surgery, if you don’t first fix what’s in here,’” she tapped her temple, “‘then it won’t matter what you do to your body. You’ll never be satisfied.’”

Only a fucked up society and even more fucked up societal expectations could convince a woman like this she was less than. It was one of the most irritating aspects of the species—that need to shame others. That need to tell someone that there was something wrong with them, and there’d been something wrong with them from the day they were born.

“Do you see something wrong?” she asked. “Something I should be concerned ab—”

“God, no.”

But he wouldn’t object to a closer inspection.

“I mean,” he tried and failed to detach his retinas from her areolas, “no, nothing at all. You look healthy from where I’m sitting. From a physician’s standpoint, your skin is,” *gorgeous*, “smooth and has a healthy glow to it. I don’t see any signs of mole abnormalities or dimpling in your,” *mouth-watering*, “breasts that might indicate malignancy. But if there’s something specific bothering you, point it out, and I could...”

Touch it.

Kiss it.

Lick it.

“Take a closer look,” he finished.

She fell back on the bed.

Her breasts bounced twice.

“Is that what started everything?” he asked. “Body image?”

“You’re still staring at my breasts.”

“I know.”

She laughed. “To answer your question...no. The first time I learned I was ‘pretty for a dark-skinned girl,’ I was thirteen. It was my Aunt Steffie.”

Steffie could asphyxiate for all he cared.

“Then it was all anyone would talk about. ‘Don’t do this, don’t do that.

You'll spoil your beauty.' Everything was always tied back to how I looked. Naturally, I became obsessed with being put together—perfect hair, perfect makeup, nails, lashes. If I wasn't being seen, I didn't exist.”

Because people held on to compliments and insults, and then they leaned toward which would give them the most attention. If they received both, they became suspended in attachment limbo. One insult or compliment from the right person could shape a person's life trajectory.

It certainly had been the case for him.

“I continued to mature, got boobs and an ass, and it got worse,” she went on. “One comment was all it took, in college, from a guy I didn't even care about. ‘Raina, your ass and titties are so nice, I don't even care that you have a stomach.’”

“So your physique became a new frontier,” he said, his fingers moving along the dark lines along her hip.

“I went on a diet, and with that diet, I developed an unhealthy relationship with food. There were now good foods, bad foods. If I messed around and ate any of the bad foods, I had to get them out of me.”

“Purging?”

“And laxatives. Or I'd take Adderall to suppress my appetite. Sometimes, I wouldn't eat to avoid feeling guilty about eating the wrong thing.”

“What got you to this point?” He thumbed the dark marks underneath her breasts. “To where you love your body?”

Her warm, living, breathing, beautiful body.

“My blood sugar got dangerously low,” she explained. “My hair fell out. I had no period and a host of nutritional deficiencies. But what sent me to the hospital was when I collapsed in one of my grad school classes. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't get air, and I panicked. I thought I was dying.”

He searched his brain for possibilities. She waited as if she'd expected him to.

“Spontaneous pneumothorax?” he asked. “You had a collapsed lung?”

“Yep.”

“Did your family find out, or did you tell them?”

“I told them, but O.B. said he knew something was going on, but he didn't realize things were that bad. So,” she cupped her breasts again, “I teach myself to love the things everyone expects me to hate. Daily.”

“Would it help if I said I love them too?”

“Yes.” She smiled. “It would.”

“Sometimes, when I’m exhausted or stressed, I can’t read,” he found himself sharing. “I make mistakes. I get anxious, wondering if this is the moment everyone finds out. The moment I won’t be able to hide it. When it happens, I still feel ashamed. All these years later, and I struggle with it occasionally.”

“But you know you’re amazing, right?”

“So my wife tells me.”

“Saraci, I won’t judge you for something like that, and if we’re together when that happens, tell me. I’ll help you.”

“That’s the difficult part, accepting that I still need help.”

“The difficult part?” She sat up. “Lucas, you had two learning disabilities, and you went on to become a *surgeon*—one of the best in your field. You can do difficult things, baby. That means you can do this.”

A rock of emotion struck him in the chest, and the pain stung him down to his elbows. Raina didn’t want children, either, so it didn’t matter what future his brain tried to show him.

Who it tried to show him.

“Then I’ll extend the same sentiment,” he said. “I’m your husband. For three months, six months, forever...it doesn’t matter. I’ll support you. I’ll be there for you. And, to me, your body is amazing, Raina. Your gorgeous skin stretched to accommodate your lovely curves. Your DNA can be damaged by radiation from sunlight, so your body created a pigment to protect the heart of the cell, where your DNA is stored. Where the essence of who you are is stored. Maybe it’s because I’m a nerd, but I happen to find that stunning.”

The side of her mouth tipped up into a soft rise as she studied him, brows slack. “I’ll be honest,” she prefaced. “You make one hell of a sexy nerd.”

After slipping on her half-shirt, which did stop at the bottoms of her breasts, he went to prep for bed. His shower took a bit longer than usual—the image of her breasts remained imprinted on his brain, which then combined with the taste of her mouth and nipples and how wet she’d felt against his thumb.

Matters had to be handled.

So, he returned to a snoring wife.

If he could sleep, almost gleefully, next to this beautiful English Bulldog, he shuddered to think what he would be like if he fell in love with her.

He climbed into bed.

Less than a full minute later, one of her legs was across his. Her pillow

fell to the ground next to the bed, and she fumbled until one arm smacked him in the chest in what he guessed was supposed to be a gentle stroke or pat.

“Good night, Lucas,” she said, the words muffled by her face pressing into the bedsheets.

The last woman he’d slept next to regularly was Emmaline, who was “perfect” in everything she did. Emmaline would have rather had her nails peeled off with pliers than snore in her sleep. In the mornings, he hadn’t been allowed to kiss her until she’d showered, brushed her teeth, put on her makeup, and had taken at least one sip of coffee. Now, Hell’s Tinker Bell had him trapped-by-leg.

Trapped by sexy, shapely leg.

“Good night, Rai,” he said.

More and more and day by day, he was starting to believe that this thing between them might actually be able to work.

Chapter Fourteen

“Saraci,” Raina looked around, “I love it.”

When she’d suggested that they get a house together, especially one initially purchased by a professional athlete, he’d been expecting his condo in house form with sky-high ceiling beams and a backyard tossed in.

On the outside, this house marveled, showing off with its wooden slats, wide front porch, and endearing shuttered exterior windows. As they drove up, Raina had called it “cute,” and while it wasn’t the word he would have used, it perfectly described the home, tucked away from the rest of its neighbors.

Then, they discovered that the outside was something of an illusion. Somehow, the builders had fit several thousand square feet into something that looked otherwise quaint. He’d been expecting to be receptive to it, but as they walked through the family room, he found himself more than receptive.

He *liked* it.

So far, he’d pictured them asleep on the sofa, being watched over by the massive windows. He saw movie nights and lit fireplaces, Raina’s lips on a wooden spoon as she marveled over his latest saucy creation.

The other images, he ignored. These days, it was like he had a biological clock, and it ran on solar power.

Raina took his hand and led him to the kitchen, the gesture automatic. “What do you think, Saraci?” She released him to run her palms along the stone countertop. “It’s lovely, right? We should be able to do this for three months.”

It would be easy to agree.

Almost too easy.

Before her, his emotions were more straightforward. Every once in a while, he would experience something it would take him a minute to put a name to, but for the most part, he had three feelings—contentment, anger, and self-confidence.

In Greece, he'd looked at Raina and felt excitement. Then he talked to her and was hit with waves upon waves of awkwardness. Now, it was awe, pride, nervousness, and frustration, all circulating in a nebulous cloud that he desperately wanted to hate but couldn't.

“Upstairs?” she asked.

He nodded.

Following her up the stairs turned out to be a blur. By the time they reached the second-floor landing, he had no idea what the railing looked like or what the stairs were made of. If he had his way, Raina would never again leave the house wearing form-fitting jeans or tops that didn't go all the way down to her knees.

There had to be a store that sold nothing but outfits made from burlap sacks that covered her from neck to ankle. She knew what kind of body she had; why not make more of an effort to cover it? Did she *want* him to become homicidal?

He'd gone for casual—a suit, tie, and vest but no blazer. Next time, he would bring the blazer and drape her in it, over her sweater.

“Saraci, look at this room.” She disappeared through a wide doorway. “It's so huge, we could fit two king-sized beds in here.”

There was no other word to describe the room but *suite* with its massive picturesque windows and enough floor space to hold a gymnastics competition.

She stood at the window and stared at the lawn, her shoulders moving with a sigh. Even if they'd had dozens of homes to choose from, watching her contentment would have had him signing on the dotted line of any application a realtor tossed his way.

He went to stand beside her. “What do you mean two king-sized beds? You were the one who proposed we make this experience as real as possible. This isn't a nineteen-fifties television show. We're sharing a bed.”

She raised her fingertips to the window, but they never quite touched the glass. “I'm joking, of course. Honestly, how am I supposed to ravish you if we're sleeping in separate beds? And you know how much I want to ravish you.”

Obviously, she was joking.

“Do you miss your place back in North Carolina?” He swallowed, nervous trills moving up his spine. “Are you just now realizing that you’ll be my prisoner for the next three months?”

“I agreed to this, Saraci.”

“I know, but it’s getting more real now. Do you know how many patients I see who, at our initial consult, are ‘not afraid to die,’ and then when they learn how serious their condition is, that changes? Facing something and anticipating something are two very different scenarios.”

She reached over, gently squeezing his hand. “Let’s go check out the rest of the house.”

He agreed, though it was unnecessary. With the way she looked at and talked about the house, there was no way he could have said no unless he’d hated everything about it. The only thing he hated was the feeling of “home” and what those comforts might bring out of him.

They returned to the first floor.

She leaned over one side of the kitchen island while he stood on the other, the tops of her breasts partially visible in her sweater. Once they moved in together, he would find all her tops that weren’t high-necked and place them with her sleepwear.

“What now?” she asked. “I mean, first, do you like it?”

Something told him to lie, to be difficult.

To not give in.

“It’s not bad,” he said.

“Doable for three months?”

“Seems that way.”

She groaned. “Saraci, you don’t have to be combative all the time. You were the one who proposed staying hitched, offering yourself as a reward.”

“I am a reward. Me, my time, my expertise...these are all things that will be useful to you at some point.”

“The things I want to do to that ego of yours.” She pushed up off the counter. “I’m calling Miguel.”

“Wait.” He blocked her path. Finding any reason to touch her, he plucked a fake piece of lint from her hairline. “What if something breaks?”

“What happens when things break at the condo?”

“The HOA includes maintenance.” He held up both hands. “These are important. I can’t risk any harm to them.”

And he wasn't handy.

At all.

In college, the IKEA furniture he'd purchased for his dorm almost sent him into counseling at the student services center.

She stepped forward, grabbed one hand, and kissed the knuckle of his middle finger. Instantly, his face flushed, and he took several steps backward until there was a sizable distance between them.

"Why'd you do that?"

"You said they were important." She shrugged. "So, I gave one a little kiss."

"Why would you...nobody kisses hands."

"Me kissing your hand puts a hole in that theory." She raised an eyebrow. "Maybe brush up on your literature, Dr. Saraci. Women have lips, and some even use those lips to kiss surgeons' hands. Then those surgeons get weird and blush and run away."

"I don't blush."

"You're still blushing."

"Tell Miguel we'll take it, but I'm making payments for the ninety days." He found the nearest AC vent and positioned himself so it blew directly onto his face. "We'll start moving things in next week when you return."

"You'll be paying on the condo and this house?"

"Doctors don't only make their salaries. There's consulting, medical writing, teaching, hospital privileges...but I guess, to you, that's pennies."

She gave him a look she hadn't used before, tilting her head to the side and lowering it as if peering over the rim of a pair of glasses. He almost heard the words, "Really, Saraci," and barely managed to suppress a smile. It would be a weird reaction to have, considering they were currently mid-verbal scuffle, but the woman made his heart do all sorts of weird shit.

"My father's the wealthy one," she insisted.

"Turkish culture is extremely family-oriented, so forgive me if I can't separate the two, especially seeing how you're close with your father."

"So is African culture, Black culture."

"If you needed it, would he give it to you?"

She opened her mouth but then snapped it shut.

"Exactly."

"Whatever, Saraci."

So, they were back to normal. Back to Demon Raina and Serpent Lucas.

He strode across the room, situated her behind him, and waited for the man who'd entered the house, unannounced, to raise his head. Raina had talons, breathed fire, and a tongue made for shredding egos, but he cared about her much more than he let on. Even cold hearts cracked, and regardless of what he showed, he'd never harbored more than an ice cube in his chest cavity.

The man looked up. "Oh, I didn't know anyone was here yet. I'm Davis, Miguel and Delilah's realtor. I was coming over to ensure everything was in order with the house, but it looks like you guys beat me here."

Lucas searched his memories to determine whether Delilah had ever mentioned a realtor named Davis during one of their lunch break sessions.

"Our realtor, Davis Schofield, is showing us a condo today," Delilah said, cutting her sandwich in half with a flimsy plastic knife. "I'm still not sure if I want to do a condo or house, but a house seems like I'm saying, 'Hey, I want a baby,' and Miguel and I came too close to that already."

Lucas grabbed an actual knife from his desk drawer and walked it over to her. "Didn't you say that you want to wait until the last year of residency before considering children? At least before your fellowship."

"Yes. You always swear you don't listen to me."

"I don't."

"So that was just a guess?"

"Delilah, please. It's a knife, not a hacksaw."

"Lucas Saraci." He held out a hand. "And the magical fairy behind me is my wife, Raina."

Davis shook his hand, and when Davis turned to Raina, the man's eyes lit up a little too bright for his liking.

"I know Raina. Delilah's always talking about her sister."

Raina tried to step around him, but the woman must have been out of her mind.

Not in those jeans.

Plus, the little light in Davis' eyes told him that the realtor had probably scrolled through Raina's feed before, maybe even liked some of her pictures.

What had he become?

Six months in, and he was already familiar with social media semantics.

Delilah had suggested he create a social media account, and she'd volunteered to manage it. However, when he saw how much people loved

medical content, he hired someone to take over so Delilah could focus on school. According to her, his popularity was due to his looks, but he was an excellent teacher; people simply loved learning about medical concepts.

“So, like what you see?” Davis asked.

“Do you?” he countered.

Raina fought until she managed to squeeze half of her body from behind the prison his frame had trapped her in. “Yes, we love it,” she said. “It’s beautiful.”

“Miguel said that all you needed to do was give the go-ahead, and it’s off the market. Might I ask why for only three months?”

“Renovations,” Raina cut in. “We’re glad that we’re able to stay at a friend’s property until our place finishes getting updates.”

Davis, nodding, folded his arms. “Nice. Where do you live now?”

“It’s a condo near Inner Harbor.”

“Inner Harbor? Those places go for seven figures, on average. I know what you do, Raina, but what do—”

“How do you know what she does?” Lucas asked. “Delilah again?”

Raina groaned under her breath. “Lucas is an otolaryngologist.”

“A...what?”

“*Oh-toe-lah-rinn-gologist*,” she repeated and then exhaled as if she’d run a mile in under a minute. “It’s a mouthful, so that’s why people use ear, nose, and throat doctor. But, what many people don’t know is that ENTs are often also head and neck surgeons, which my Lucas is.”

Again, his face flushed.

“Got it,” Davis said. “So, what kind of renovations are you guys doing?”

This guy asked entirely too many questions. It was as if he was talking just to hear Raina’s voice. Maybe he was picturing her naked. The way he scanned her repeatedly suggested it.

It was what he would have done.

What he was always doing.

Raina slid her fingers between his. “We’re thinking about our first child, so we’re upgrading our place to prepare for that.”

An invisible fist punched him in the stomach. A tiny menace would never run through his place, dropping cereal all over his expensive floors, worming its way into his heart.

Raina faced him, fake pout at the ready, and toyed with his sleeve. Had it not been for their present company, he would have pushed her up against a

wall and kissed her until he magically slipped inside her.

“*Pookie*,” she cooed and used her tongue to poke away a grin. “I really like this place.”

“*Bunny*,” he hissed, “this is a lot to handle.”

“You handle me just fine.”

“You’re six inches tall.”

She poked away another grin. “We can manage it for a few months, can’t we? It’ll be good practice for when we have our first baby.”

He addressed Davis without looking at him. “We need a few minutes alone.”

“Of course,” Davis said. “I’ll be right outside.”

She thought she was funny.

She had no clue how close to danger she was.

“Can’t you imagine it, Saraci?” She stepped away, just out of his reach. “Me, you, a dog. Our first kid. Maybe a couple of kids, and then we could buy a place like this. A place where we could grow old together, give our kids somewhere to come home to after college.”

He loosened his tie. “Stop it.”

“You’re blushing again.”

“I don’t...” He ground his teeth together, the molars shifting like a chainsaw. “Do you really like it here, Raina? Because once we say yes, everything’s going into motion. You’ll be mine, all mine, and if you knew the things I want to do to you, I don’t think you’d so readily agree.”

“What things?” she asked.

“Last time, Raina.”

“I could ask you the same. Have you ever been married? Lived with a woman?”

“No, and yes.”

She went still. “You have?”

“You’ve never lived with a man?”

“No.” She shook her head, the playfulness and weightlessness in her demeanor no longer present. “Never.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Was it for a long time?”

“Two and half years.”

She grimaced. “Shit.”

In a few steps, his hand was at the small of her back. “Are you okay?”

“Weird chest pain, but I’m okay. I’m ready. Three months. I’ll text Miguel. Want me to let Davis know?”

“You already know I don’t.”

“Possessiveness can be terrifying.”

“Only if you’re afraid of me.” He leaned closer. “I don’t have to spell it out. You know there’s only one way I want to hurt you.”

“Break my heart?”

He frowned. “I’d never break your heart.”

“You wouldn’t?”

“No, Raina. I adore you.” Suddenly uncomfortable, he released her and started for the garage door. “I’ll inform Davis.”

“Wait.” She grabbed his wrist. “Wait a second.”

She swiped her thumb along her bottom lip and then swiped it along his. Then she took his hands and mussed up her hair.

“What are you doing?”

She slackened his tie.

Unhooked the button on her jeans.

“Making it look like you needed some convincing,” she said.

“Or I could kiss you.”

“Go get me a house, husband.” She swatted him on the butt. “Make your wife happy.”

He reached around her using his left hand, cupped her ass, and dragged her up against him. “Just so you know,” he placed his lips so close to her ear, they brushed the stud in her earlobe, “by the time I’m done with you, you’ll be greeting me at the door on your knees...*bunny*.”

She kissed his jaw.

He stopped breathing.

The kisses continued, moving from his jaw to his cheekbone, his head turning as if on a swivel. Then their eyes met, and he prayed she didn’t see what he hoped she couldn’t see in his eyes.

Their lips brushed.

The air in his lungs returned.

“Thank you, baby,” she said. “I honestly love this house.”

Reluctantly, he released her and headed outside.

While he and Davis discussed the next steps, he made circles with the thumb on his right hand against his left palm, over and over, back and forth.

Repeatedly.

Endlessly.
Obsessively.

Chapter Fifteen

More and more and day by day, he was starting to believe that this thing between them might not actually be able to work.

“Saraci, that doesn’t fit the theme I hoped to put in our new home. I was going for something charming and comfortable that we’ll both enjoy coming home to. Something softer.”

Lucas tightened his grip around the wire frame of the clock that had sparked this latest debate. As long as she was in this house, it didn’t matter what decor it had; it would be a house he would enjoy coming home to.

Still, he wanted this clock, and clearly, he and Raina had forgotten to discuss an essential part of moving in together.

“Charm?” he asked. “You mean like rustic? You know rustic is just a ruse to get people to buy old crap that others had sitting and oxidizing in their garages for decades, right? This is modern. We’re going with a modern, more contemporary theme like the one at my place.”

“Saraci, that isn’t a clock. It’s two pieces of wire inside another circular piece of wire. Who can even tell time on that?”

“Sane people.”

“So, only three of the four people in this room.” She motioned to herself, Delilah, and Miguel. The other couple watched on, Miguel holding a box labeled *Fragile* while Delilah stood next to him, a stack of books cradled to her chest, her brown skin paler than usual.

“And when did we agree on a theme?” Raina asked. “What you have at the condo works for condos, but it won’t work for a house like this. We didn’t move here to replicate your place. The point was to do this on neutral ground.”

“This clock is a combination of art and function.” He softened his tone. “I like this clock, Raina. My mother gave me this clock.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Really. Your mother.”

“Yes. After her Hajj, her pilgrimage to Mecca, she picked it up on her way back to Maryland after stopping in her hometown of Bursa. My mother and I didn’t see eye to eye for most of my adult life. It’s one of the only good memories I have of us.”

It was the only true statement in anything he’d said. His mother had accused medicine of making him anti-religious, called him a *murtadd* for “turning his back on Islam,” and took a vow of silence against him until terminal illness made her break it.

The last time they spoke, she told him that she regretted picking tradition over her love for him. That, despite all the years they went without speaking to one another, she never loved him any less than the first time she held him in her arms.

In an instant, he went from family blight to treasured son. Not long after that, he ended his relationship with Emmaline, and slowly, his ‘two roads diverged in a yellow wood’ merged into one path.

Raina was neither the impetus nor the catalyst for him returning to the doctor he’d always hoped to be, but she was there, on that path, at first a blur, until she lit the spark that ignited the rest of the way.

“I don’t believe you,” she said.

He shrugged. “You’re entitled to your disbelief.”

“If you get to keep the clock, I get to pick the living room furniture.”

“I don’t agree to that.”

“Then the clock is torched.”

“Try it.”

“I’ll throw that thing in the fireplace to prove a point.”

“Even after what I just told you?” he asked.

“Living room furniture, Lucas.”

Concession was not his strong suit.

“I’d like a say.”

“A say, Saraci,” she said. “Not you telling me what to buy, and if I want something different, you grumble and create stories about a clock your mother bought you in Turkey when I’m pretty sure I saw it on Wayfair at some point.”

A smile almost crept up on him. “Fine. And it’s going above the

fireplace.”

“No, it’s not.”

They stared each other down.

“Daniels? A word.” He set down the clock, started for the garage, stopped at the garage door, and turned around. “*Daniels.*”

Delilah jumped.

Miguel cleared his throat and held up the box. “Uh, where do I put this in the meantime?”

“In the garage,” Raina answered.

“Upstairs, in the first bedroom on the left,” Lucas countered. “My office.”

“Lucas, we never finished discussing which room would be your office. Plus, you said that’s the room you *didn’t* want.”

“Well, I want it now.”

Raina pointed to a corner. “Miguel, put it over there, and then I need to speak with you about a pressing matter regarding a certain megalomaniac.”

Lucas snorted. “Daniels, on your way, bring holy water.”

Delilah set the books on the floor and dragged her legs over to him. He opened the garage door for her to step through and followed her, the door slamming behind them.

Had Miguel not been a family friend, one of Raina’s best friends since childhood and her sister’s fiancé, he would have stayed inside. The man was young, handsome, and rich. On the other hand, he was a little over a decade older than Raina, and Miguel had the benefit of not being a pain in Raina’s unexpectedly soft ass.

Delilah sighed and leaned against the garage wall. “Yes, Dr. S? You bellowed?”

He stared at the closed garage door. “I want that woman to have my children.”

“*What?*”

“Nothing.” He scratched his forehead. “I don’t know. Why am I talking to you about this? About any of this?”

“I ask myself that same question every day. I’m starting to think I should form a support group for current and former students who have suffered abuse at the hands of Dr. Lucas Saraci.”

“I’m hard on you because it makes you stronger.” Already, he’d been called into the department head’s office twice because of his “evident preference” for Delilah Daniels.

Contrary to what they'd accused him of, there were other students he gave opportunities to. Promising students who balanced intellect with empathy. Thinkers and problem-solvers who saw patients as people.

His mother, with her broken, highly-accented English and her hijab, wasn't seen as a person. His best friend wasn't seen as a person until it was too late.

"In the beginning, I was afraid of you," Delilah said. "Now, I'm no longer afraid of you because I think you're too insane to be a realistic threat."

He restrained a laugh. "Insane?"

"There are people with psychoses. There are people with trauma. There are people with personality disorders. None of these people are categorically insane. They're sick, and they deserve our care the same way we might treat someone with cancer or diabetes. But then," she gestured to him, "there's you. You deserve only loathing."

He held back another laugh. "I like your sister, and I don't mean I like her a little bit."

"You don't say."

However, he still couldn't pinpoint the *something* about her, only describe everything around it. And he wanted to cherish it. Be next to it. Spend time with it. Argue with it. Put his hands all over it. Fall asleep inside it.

Delilah sighed. "Dr. S, normal people? You know, people who aren't you or Raina? They would have ended this marriage thing already if they truly didn't want to be together, but I suspect that's not the case for either of you. I mean, did you look up the annulment requirements? At all?"

Sure, if a glance was considered "looking up."

"As it stands, we don't clearly enough meet the requirements for an annulment in the State of Nevada," he said.

Delilah rubbed her brows, then smoothed them back into place. "With how often people get married there, it's not just an online form?"

"We might be able to qualify under their 'want of understanding' clause if we can provide clear evidence that we were intoxicated at the time of the marriage."

"And you can't?"

"I can't."

"Why not?"

He considered telling her the truth, but Delilah wasn't precisely a vault. If

she told Raina, Raina might feel like he violated her trust even though he didn't have any nefarious reasons for marrying her. He didn't plan to hurt her, but when presented with the opportunity to make her his, he'd had no other choice.

He *had* to take it.

Had she demanded that they get an annulment the following day, he would have given it to her without an issue, no matter what it took. Had she declined his offer to be part of her research in exchange for staying married to him, he would have still asked her on a date. But when presented with the opportunity to be with her the way they were now? It was a yes, all day and every day.

"I wouldn't know how to prove we were intoxicated."

"Didn't you have witnesses?" Delilah flailed her arms above her head. "There are cameras all over Vegas. Maybe you can get footage of you two that clearly shows you were drunk? Or maybe a bartender who remembers that you two had a significant number of drinks?"

No one would remember them drinking too much because they'd had all their drinks in the privacy of his hotel room. Then, by the time they purchased the rings, he'd been more sober than a glass of water.

"I don't...want to try," he said.

She nodded. "I know. You're really into her. But you're always at each other's throats."

Anger was the quickest way he knew of to dilute sexual energy. Raina sucked necks, kissed jaws and fingers. It was all in fun for her, and she probably thought he was impervious to every touch, but it was the furthest thing from the truth.

"Daniels, I'm not a man who feels uncertain of himself, but your sister does that. Makes me feel that way. She makes me feel things."

Things he hated.

Things he loved.

Things he could get addicted to.

"Why does she fight me?"

"Because you fight with her. Because she loves a challenge. That's why I think she likes you. In the past, she dated older men, and in those relationships, she was," Delilah grimaced, "docile."

"Docile? Raina?"

Impossible.

“Raina struggles with perfection and imperfections,” Delilah went on. “The minute you put your heart on the line, it’s on the line. It’s out there to get broken. The way she grew up, the focus was always on her looks, and you can see why. Raina’s beautiful.”

Wildly beautiful.

She even gave his heart a slight flutter when he first sat down next to her in Athens, a man who’d felt zero wings in his chest or stomach since his high school girlfriend.

“She’s also dark-skinned,” Delilah added. “So, I think that’s why our folks focused so much on her beauty. Despite looks like hers, people will still call her ugly because of her complexion. People have.”

“Who called her ugly?”

“They’re not here right now, Dr. S.”

“Are they on her Instagram page?”

Delilah squeezed her forehead. “My point is this. Raina loves a challenge. She loves a fight. She won’t show that she’s scared you’ll think she’s wonderful and perfect, but then you’ll change your mind after she’s fallen for you. Part of me thinks that’s why she agreed to this; she’s trying to prove she’s right about men being vain. The other reason? She likes you.”

He frowned.

If he didn’t, his smile would cover the house.

“Is this a guess?” he asked.

“Remember when you came to the football game where,” she raised her left hand, “Miguel proposed to me? She told me then.”

“That she likes me.”

“Yes.”

An annulment was officially off the table. If she “liked” him, did that mean she *did* want to ravish him? Was that why she sent him lunch, hugged him in her sleep, and added that one ‘*emoji*’ with the kissing face at the end of her texts?

“Be nice to her, Dr. S,” Delilah said. “Just try it. You like peas, right? I think I’ve seen you eat peas. You couldn’t have always liked peas, but you eventually had to try them to be eating them now.”

“Delilah, I happen to be a very nice man.”

“Yeah, compared to Satan.”

He failed the battle with the smile, and then the smile gave way to a laugh.

“Oh!” She pointed to his face. “Such a pretty smile! It must be like how new items are the most beautiful when you first take them out of the package.”

“Daniels, go.”

“I’m going.” She hurried to the garage door. “I’m going.”

Chapter Sixteen

Raina paced the length of the kitchen while Miguel watched her from the other side of the island.

“Guel, I like him.”

Miguel cocked his head to the side. “Oh? Do you, now?”

“Delilah told you?”

“I’ve known you since I was eight, Raina. You would never keep going back and forth with him if you didn’t find it...titillating.”

“Then why do I want to,” she curled her fingers, “strangle him, sometimes?”

Miguel shrugged. “Because you’re Raina, and I hear that sometimes married people do want to strangle their spouse from time to time. Can’t say it’ll be that way with me and Delilah, but we’re kind and pleasant people. You and Saraci are fire and lava, and I’m not sure which is which.”

She rolled her eyes.

“It’s a nice house, isn’t it?” Miguel looked around, smiling a little. “Lilah and I would have gone with it, but a condo makes more sense at this stage in our relationship.”

He went quiet, but considering how long she’d known him, she knew his silence was temporary. This was supposed to be her moment to confess what he knew she was hiding, yet he would wrangle it out of her even if she didn’t.

“How’d you end up agreeing to live with him again?” he asked. “Delilah didn’t fully explain that part. You two got drunk in Vegas and ended up married, but the part I don’t get is why there’s no annulment in progress. Why, if the marriage was a mistake, you’re moving in together.”

“Temporarily,” she said.

He lowered his head by a millimeter and raised his left eyebrow, and she heard the words, “*Don’t bullshit me,*” without him having to open his mouth.

“He said that if I stayed married to him for three months, he would help me with my research. He’s a well-known name, so it would be huge.”

Miguel came around to her side of the kitchen island. “Why’d you say yes?”

“The research.”

“Raina, when it comes to alcohol, despite you being the size of a pencil eraser, you can hold your liquor.” He searched her face. “You weren’t drunk, were you? You married him sober. You didn’t agree because of research. You *want* to be married to him, but you don’t want the responsibility of going through the process of falling in love.”

Miguel was like a part of the family, and he legally would be when he and Delilah got married. However, that knowledge didn’t stop it from ticking her off that he read her so well.

“I married him to prove a point,” she insisted. “He told me that his last name would be mine one day, and he was so...confident about it.”

Too confident.

No one in her life had ever declared their intentions like that, and she couldn’t erase the memory from her brain, her dreams, or stop it from chipping away at her previously set-in-stone future plans.

Children.

All of a sudden, she was thinking about children. Seriously considering children.

They wouldn’t have any—this was, more than likely, a phase—but she thought about starting a family more than she ever had in the past. She *saw* things she’d never seen, felt urges and tugs that had nothing to do with how badly she wanted to make love to him.

“So, he was right?” Miguel prodded. “Technically, you do now share his last name.”

There was nothing wrong with *Daniels*.

She liked *Daniels*.

Yet, her silly ass changed her name in her phone at breakneck speed, at first out of curiosity to see how it would look, how it would flow. But then she didn’t even have the gall to hyphenate.

She wasn’t in love with him, but did “like” pull this strong?

Since when?

If this was like, what did love look like?

“Guel, he doesn’t know enough about me to feel that way.” She gestured to him. “You and Delilah have known each other nearly all your lives. If that had been the case with me and Lucas, it would have made sense, but how can a man who knows so little about me be *that* certain he wants to...marry me one day?”

“Have you ever asked?”

“Not really, no.”

Miguel leaned forward, setting his forearms on the countertop. “Rai, why not just tell him how you feel?”

“He knows how I feel.”

“If I don’t, he doesn’t.”

“What do you mean you don’t? I just told you. I like him. I like how intelligent he is. I love how he looks out for Delilah, how he cares about her. I love his voice, his eyes, his long-fingered surgeon’s hands, and his bad attitude. I like how he challenges me, and I know there’s more to him, but he prefers to live like a cactus. I have a feeling that he might be the kindest asshole I’ve ever met, and those types, they’re difficult. Usually, they’re prickly because of the perceived need to protect something, or someone, close to them, but you know the heart behind all those thorns is...”

Beautiful.

She was scared that Dr. Demon might have a beautiful heart. In fact, it terrified her that he might one day offer her that beautiful heart.

“You like that he’s prickly,” Miguel said.

“Guel, he isn’t always like that. He has these...these moments.” She sighed, her thoughts taking her back to that first morning in Las Vegas. “Sometimes, I catch him looking at me a certain way, like staring at me from his desk when he thought I was asleep on the couch in his office at the clinic. Then, if he never opened his mouth and said it, I would still know this man thinks I’m beautiful. And smart. And funny. I know I drive him crazy, but I can tell it doesn’t change the way he sees me.”

Miguel nudged her with his elbow. “Everything you just told me, have you ever tried telling the mad doctor any of that?”

She wrinkled her nose. “No.”

“Tell him everything you told me.”

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because it scares me.” There. She’d spoken the truth to at least one person. “I’ve never put myself in a position where someone I want, really want, can disapprove of me. I only dated men who couldn’t hurt me and never cared about learning who I was underneath all the glamour. But Lucas? He could break my heart.”

Regardless of what he’d said.

“No, Raina. I adore you.”

“Guel, what if he’s strong enough to undo all of the progress I’ve made? What if his...*want* for me is all an act, I fall for him, and then he changes? I’ve never been in love. Love can build you or break you, and the uncertainty of it? It makes me uncomfortable.”

Years ago, the fatigue of the modeling lifestyle started to set in. Still, she didn’t leave back then. Modeling was a form of desensitization; the industry repeatedly exposed her to the temptation to fall back into old habits, and each time she avoided doing so, she gained a bit of strength.

“I understand how you feel, Raina,” Miguel said. “But, at some point, you *will* have to be vulnerable. I nearly lost Delilah because of what someone else did to me. The love of my life, Raina. I nearly lost her because I was scared too.”

She blinked back tears.

When she’d learned all that he’d gone through, O.B. and Delilah had to step in to stop her from hunting down a woman—a term she used loosely—named Luz. If they hadn’t, she would have gone to jail, and her mugshot would have been Vanity Fair-worthy.

So, Miguel did understand how terrifying vulnerability could be, but sometimes, it wasn’t until a weakness was exposed that someone showed whether they were a friend or an enemy.

“I’m not saying your fear isn’t valid,” he added, and his advice alone told her his therapy was going well. “But it’s love, not cliff-diving. And if he’s not who he says he is, me, Carson, and O.B. will fuck him up for you. How’s that?”

She laughed. “It does help.”

The garage door opened.

Delilah reentered the house, and before Miguel could grab the *Fragile* box, Delilah took his wrist, mumbled something about a prior engagement,

and then they both ran out like a tornado threatened to tear through the living room.

“I think they’re sick of us,” Lucas said.

Raina snorted. “Guess it’s a good thing you’re a doctor.”

He stared at her for a moment.

One of *those* moments.

Then they separated.

“Hey, Saraci?” She tapped the box with the side of her foot. “Want me to take this upstairs? To your office?”

“No, I’ll take it.” He walked over, picked it up, and instead of heading upstairs, he headed toward the garage.

While he was gone, she grabbed the “precious clock” his mother clearly never gave him and hadn’t bought in Turkey and held it up near the fireplace.

An idea came to her—it would work well on a circular, wooden platform.

When Lucas returned, she’d just finished taking measurements. He stood next to where she was perched on her knees, but then she remembered his comment about how she would greet him and sat on the floor.

“Did you have breakfast this morning?” he asked.

“I had a cup of tea.”

“Tea isn’t breakfast,” he studied the wire clock, “and it’s way past lunch. I’ll make dinner.”

It was obvious that it was way past lunch because of the setting sun outside, but she would bet her left kidney he couldn’t tell what time it actually was.

She tipped her head at the kitchen. “I bought cookware. It’s on the counter. Do you want to inspect them first? See if you approve?”

He went to the kitchen.

Then, his sigh echoed throughout the entire front living area.

“Raina, they’re pink.”

“They’re salmon.”

“Adding more pink to pink dye doesn’t stop pink from being pink.”

She joined him in the kitchen. “So you don’t like them? They got excellent reviews. Some of them were even from chefs.”

“I’ll reserve my judgments until after I see how they perform.” He unpacked the box and took the set to the sink. “Any requests?”

“Do you have a specialty?”

“If you want it, I’ll try to make it.”

She sat on the kitchen island while he washed the pots and pans. Every once in a while, she caught herself staring at him, but when he looked up, she turned away.

“How about Italian food?” she suggested. “Pasta?”

“Pesto tortellini sound good?”

“Sounds amazing.”

“Can I ask what made you go vegetarian?”

She’d stopped eating meat because she had what the treatment center had referred to as an “overlap eating disorder.” It was always the last thing she’d taste in her throat, whether she’d had meat or not.

“It’s a...flavor thing,” she said.

“Got it. Can you dry these while I prep?”

“Of course.”

She slid off the counter.

He started on the pasta and refused her help twice once she finished the pans. Today, he didn’t go with gray sweatpants. Instead, he wore a simple T-shirt and loose-fitting athletic shorts. Still, he was the sexiest man she’d ever seen.

“Saraci?” She stood next to him at the chopping board and held her phone screen where he could see it. “What do you think of this? And if you don’t like sectionals,” she scrolled, “they offer it as part of a sofa collection. There’s a style called Japandi, which is a mix of Japanese and Scandinavian interior decor. I think it’s a good compromise for us.”

“What color is that, olive?”

“Yes. You don’t like green?”

“No, I like it. You have a good eye for furniture. Good design, good color, good quality.”

“It took a lot of practice.” She inched closer. “I decorated my house back in North Carolina. It took a while since designing doesn’t come naturally to me, but I didn’t hate the process.”

The side of his arm brushed hers as he chopped a few cloves of garlic. “That makes sense. You’ve got more of an analytical brain. You *can* design, but it’s after doing research, looking at examples, trial and error...like an experiment. I think that’s what makes your research successful. That intelligence and curiosity.”

Goosebumps rushed up her arms, and not wanting to disrupt his food prep was the only reason she didn’t lean against him.

“That was a compliment, Mrs. Saraci,” he said. “I thought you’d hug me...at least.”

She wrapped her arms around him from behind, gently squeezed, and pressed her cheek against the middle of his back.

“How’s this?”

“Nice.”

When she tried to release him, he reached back to hold her in place, but she eased out of his grasp. They needed to eat, and she could have held onto him for hours.

He moved to the stove. “Can you show me more of the Japandi style?”

She found additional examples and swiped through designs while he cooked. By the time he had the food arranged on two plates, as picture-perfect as everything else he did, they’d chosen a sofa, two chairs, a coffee table, floor pillows, a couple of vases, plants, and artwork.

His phone rang.

“Can you grab that for me, Rai?” he asked.

“What if it’s your girlfriend?”

“Then tell her I’m busy making dinner for my wife.”

Laughing, she retrieved his phone from the counter and accepted the call. “Hello, this is Lucas Saraci’s phone. Raina speaking.”

A reasonably deep voice answered. “Oh, Raina! Hello! It’s nice to informally meet you. My name’s Adam. Adam Morris. I’m a colleague of Saraci’s. He talks about you all the time, so it’s nice to put a voice to the name. Is he there?”

“Yes. One second.” She handed the phone to Lucas. “It’s Adam Morris.”

He frowned, raising the phone to his ear. “Morris? What’s up?”

She busied herself by grabbing a bottle from the wine fridge, but as she went to open it, Lucas’ fingers circled her wrist.

“No, it’s fine. It’s fine. Yeah, I’ll be there.” He ended the call, looked at the food, and sighed. “So, I might have forgotten that I agreed to have dinner with Adam, his wife, and a few other colleagues tonight.”

“What time?” she asked.

He glanced at the clock in the living room, squinted, and then checked his watch. “In about an hour and a half, but you don’t have to come. I sprang this on you last minute. You should probably stay here. Eat something. Get some rest.”

His lips said one thing.

His face said another.

“I can hop in and out of the shower and toss on some makeup,” she said. “Finding something to wear won’t be an issue, and my hair—”

“Looks great, to be honest.”

She smiled. “You’ve got a lot of compliments tonight, Dr. Saraci.”

“I always have compliments.” He smoothed a few strands between his fingers. “You just tend to burn them to ash with your fire-breathing ways.”

“Well then, do you have any remedies for a serpent with a,” she stroked the column of her neck, “sore throat?”

No wonder the man did all sorts of gymnastics to relieve himself from her frisky-ass grip. Never had she come on this strong before, and if she didn’t rein it in soon, he would quickly figure out that her brain wasn’t operating on a three-month timeline.

His mouth twitched. “Go get ready, Mrs. Saraci. I’ll meet you downstairs.”

* * *

Lucas hadn’t said a word since she came downstairs wearing a black sweater dress, tights, and high-heeled boots that went past her knee.

On the drive to the restaurant—nothing. As he walked around the front bumper to open her door, still nothing, but he did take her hand to head inside.

When he first looked up and saw her on the stairs, the forest in his eyes grew denser. His pupils grew blacker. At first, she didn’t pick up on it, otherwise distracted by his plaid sport coat, the sweater over his dress shirt, and his dark pants.

A little preppy.

A little sexy.

Then she noticed him, noticed what was written all over his face. Had they not already confirmed they would be attending this little dinner, she would have stripped, pushed him onto the sofa, and climbed on top of him.

He set his hand on the small of her back to usher her ahead of him through the restaurant doors and then took her hand again, absentmindedly stroking her palm with his fingers.

The second they handed off their coats, someone called his name. A man

wearing a sweater and dark slacks headed their way, his arms flailing wildly and his head like he'd doused his hair in pure silver.

Lucas groaned. "I fucking hate this man."

"Who is he?" she asked.

"Dr. John Nelson. Our department head."

"What do you hate about him?"

"That his lungs continue to function."

John Nelson continued his pursuit and slammed into Lucas, wrapping him up in a hug. John was shorter, but he was roughly fifty pounds heavier than Lucas. For a moment, it looked as if he would pick Lucas up off the floor.

"Morris told me you were coming," John said, releasing him. "But you usually don't show up to these events."

"I'm here," Lucas deadpanned.

Raina stifled a laugh.

"Come, come." John looked down, and his eyes met hers. "Sweetheart, please bring another bottle of Pinot for our table, please? Thank you."

John started off.

Lucas didn't move. "What did you just say?"

John stopped and turned on his heels. "Everything okay, Saraci?"

"What did you just ask my wife?"

Raina squeezed his hand. "Saraci, it's fine."

"This is my *wife*," Lucas said, his words sharper than a guillotine. "Why would my *wife* bring a bottle of Pinot for the table?"

He wanted to fight her battles, and she loved that he wanted to fight her battles, but they'd left a pot full of delicious-looking tortellini untouched back at home.

She was *hungry*.

John's face flushed crimson. "I'm so sorry! I apologize. She just looks so young—"

"And she's wearing a dress, not a server's uniform."

"Saraci, I didn't mean—"

"Where's the table?"

John paused and then headed for a circular table in the middle of the restaurant.

They followed.

"Man, you're ruthless," she whispered.

"Don't let the grandfather act fool you," he replied. "He and a few others

think they're part of some kind of secret coalition to get me expelled from the university."

"Why? Isn't having you at Hopkins a bonus? Your name alone can pull in so much funding for the university and hospital."

"They want to look like they have power. That they can make or break me."

"But you don't give a damn—"

"And less than a fuck."

He pulled out her chair.

Once she took her seat, he sat beside her, grabbed the underside of her chair, and pulled her closer. The table housed six people: her and Lucas, John Nelson, two more men, and one more woman.

"This is your wife?" one of the men asked, one with salt-and-pepper hair, a clean-shaven face, an angular nose, a soft chin, and cinnamon-brown eyes.

Based on the timbre of his voice, that one wasn't Adam. Therefore, Adam had to be the one with the kind, light-blue eyes and dark-brown hair wearing the green shirt that hung a little large on his shoulders.

Lucas draped an arm across the back of her chair. "Yes, this is my wife. Raina," he went around the table, "Bill Price, Adam Morris, and Adam's wife, Cheryl. Everyone, this is my 'Rai' of sunshine."

John chuckled. "And John Nelson."

Lucas didn't so much as glance the man's way, and Raina made a mental note to ask him more about the "feud" later.

Cheryl flattened her palm against her chest. "'Rai' of sunshine? How cute! It's lovely to meet you, Raina."

"It's a good thing I didn't invite Emmaline, then," John chimed in again, still chuckling. "That would have been awkward."

Raina turned to him. "Who's Emmaline?"

Adam rolled his eyes.

Bill took a sip from his glass of water.

John continued. "Emmaline is Lucas' ex. She works in the College of Medicine with us. Cardiothoracic surgery. Brilliant surgeon."

This time, when Lucas speared John with his gaze, she saw the proverbial blade go through John's neck.

Bill Price cleared his throat. "No more bottles of wine for the table."

John waved away the comment. "Price, look at her. You think Saraci's worried about Emmaline when he's found himself a twenty-something-year-

old chocolate goddess?”

Lucas unwrapped his utensils.

She kept one eye on his knives. “I’m thirty, actually,” she said.

Cheryl’s eyes opened wide. “I wouldn’t put you a day over twenty-one. Amazing. What do you do, Raina? I’m a dermatologist, by the way, so please don’t get offended if I keep staring at you. I’m marveling at your skin.”

“She does a lot of things,” Lucas said. “She owns several businesses and heads several organizations in North Carolina, including a research institute. Their focus is on the intersection of epigenetics and psychosocial adversity, and they also have a department that focuses solely on eating disorders.”

A kiss would have been tamer.

What made it worse was that he’d had a smile on his face the entire time he’d shared that miniature bio.

A faint lift of his mouth full of pride.

Bill tipped his glass in their direction. “It must have been love at first sight for Saraci, then. I know I fell in love a little just now. Epigenetics? Intersectionality? Psychosocial adversity? Wow.”

“First off, keep your ‘wow’ to yourself, Price,” Lucas warned. “And Raina, Bill here left practicing medicine for teaching and research. Cardiovascular research.”

“Interventional cardiology,” Bill added. “Stents, TAVR, which is—”

“Transcatheter Aortic Valve Replacement,” Raina finished. Hunger gnawed a hole in her stomach. “I learned a little about intervention cardiology a few years ago in a different setting.”

She flagged down a server, who immediately came running. As she placed her order, Lucas kissed the side of her head and whispered, “Don’t dazzle them too much,” teasing the lobe of her ear with the warmth of his breath.

They ordered appetizers, and she listened to the dinner conversation between the four MDs with half an ear, trying not to wolf down rice and vegetable-stuffed cabbage rolls.

But then Lucas slipped a half-eaten roll from her fingers, popped it into his mouth, reached for her glass of wine, and took a sip.

“Mmm.” He nodded. “That’s good.”

She reached for another roll, took a bite.

He grabbed it, bit off a portion, and then shoved the rest between her lips. Although she didn’t know what he was doing, what this was, if he didn’t stop

soon, she'd slip right out of her seat.

The servers brought out her mashed potatoes and mushroom steak with gravy. Lucas ordered rainbow trout with a side of vegetables and quinoa. Still, she found her fork in his mouth—several times—being guided by his hand.

“So, Raina,” Adam piped up. “You’re Delilah Daniels’ sister, right?”

Raina peeled her gaze away from Lucas’ face. “Um...yes. Yes, she’s my sister.”

“Is that how you two met?” John asked. “Or did you meet before Delilah joined us at Hopkins?”

The question came off innocently enough, but his tone made her feel as if he was trying to determine whether she might have influenced Delilah’s entry into medical school.

“Before,” Adam answered. “Saraci told me about her way before then.”

“I actually didn’t know Lucas was her instructor until I visited her at the end of her first semester,” Raina added. “That’s when we officially started dating. It was kind of serendip—”

Lucas slipped his finger into her mouth. He’d dipped his index finger into her mashed potatoes, and that finger was now in her mouth. And, as he removed the finger, he twirled it to make sure that she sucked it clean.

Her clit throbbed, her panties flooded, and her nipples hardened into pearls. “Serendipitous,” she finished. “We weren’t...expecting to run into each other again, and...yeah, serendipitous.”

Compared to her complexion, everyone else at the table had skin paler than a full moon. Therefore, underneath the restaurant’s ambient lighting, it was easy to see that all of them, including John, looked flushed. Their eyes had narrowed, and Cheryl’s nostrils flared with each breath.

Adam and Cheryl looked like they would tear each other’s clothes off in the car once they left. She didn’t know if John or Bill had anyone to strip naked, but they looked like they would find one if necessary. Lucas had put his finger in her mouth, yet no one blinked.

Who thought they could control him?

“Why don’t you tell them how I proposed, Rai?” he suggested.

First, she’d need to remember how to work her mouth—for words, at least. It certainly hadn’t forgotten how to suck on things.

She gave them the story they’d agreed upon and attempted to cast loving gazes Lucas’ way, but she knew she was looking at him like he was turning

her chair into a slip-and-slide.

“Then he said he wanted me to share his last name,” she said. “And I said yes. We went with a civil union. The wedding can come later. I couldn’t wait to be married to him.”

“So, *was it* love at first sight?” Bill teased.

She shook her head. “No. Our first meeting was a disaster, but even then, I knew there was something about him. I can’t explain it. I might never be able to, but I’ve never felt the way I feel about Lucas with anyone else. He makes me want to do things I would have considered irresponsible in the past, all because I was too afraid to let go of the steering wheel.”

Cheryl drained her glass.

Bill signaled for more water.

John tapped away on his phone screen.

Raina sucked in a breath and faced the table when, in her mind’s eye, Lucas’ clothing began to disappear. “So, that’s how Lucas proposed. Actually, can I switch gears a bit? Dr. Morris—”

Adam raised both hands. “Just Adam. Please. I feel we’ve met with how much Saraci talks about you.”

It was the third time Adam had mentioned Lucas talking about her, and again, she felt trapped in a Jane Austen novel. It was as if Adam’s last name should have been “Fitzwilliam” rather than “Morris.”

“Adam,” she corrected. “My father’s company recently entered the biotech sphere, and their objective is to invest in innovations in healthcare. He’s the president of The O.B. Sinclair Corpor—”

“Orylin Daniels is your father?” John cut in.

The mood shifted.

“I followed his company’s merger with Abe Sinclair from the beginning,” John continued. “My financial advisor anticipated that merger would happen since the nineties. They—”

“Are you going to let her finish?” Lucas asked.

John nodded. “Go on, Raina.”

“I was going to ask if you had any research, Adam,” she went on. “Bill’s already shared some of what he’s working on.”

Adam shifted in his seat. “Bioprinting, which is providing implants to patients using living cells. Patients whose joints have eroded could receive a new one made specifically for their anatomy. We’ve wanted to explore it at the hospital for a while. In addition, I have a colleague recruiting for a

clinical trial centered on VR physical therapy.”

“They’ve got money to burn,” she said. “I’m kidding, obviously, but they’re serious about funding biotech and medical innovation. If you’d like, I can connect you both.”

Adam could barely remain seated.

Bill’s mouth hung partially open.

Lucas’ phone rang, and he slipped it from his pocket. She noticed the head nurse’s name at the community clinic flash across the screen.

“I have to take this.” He turned to her. “I’ll be right back, okay?”

Before he could turn away, she cupped his jaw, coaxing him toward her. As he leaned in, his eyes searched hers.

“Please,” she whispered.

His eyes flashed.

“I’m *begging* you,” she gently pressed her lips to his, “to hurry back. Now, go before you miss your call.”

After searching her eyes again, for several long, body-rocking heartbeats, he left the table. Less than a minute later, he returned.

“Everything okay?” she asked.

“No, it looks like we’ll have to cut out early.” He pulled out her chair. “That was your sister-in-law. She and your brother have an emergency and want to know if we can watch J.R. for the night.”

Sam wouldn’t call him, and he didn’t have O.B.’s number. Also, O.B. and Sam were in Charlotte. They sent her a video of J.R. while she and Lucas were on their way to the restaurant.

Oh.

This was because she’d begged.

He was going to fuck her up.

She stood, wobbling a little. “Well, it was nice meeting everyone. Adam, Bill? I’ll get your information from Lucas.”

“Let’s get together again another time,” Cheryl said.

They said their goodbyes.

The staff brought their coats, and the valet attendant pulled up with the car. Lucas returned to his silence and didn’t break it even as they turned onto the street where their temporary home sat at the end of the cul-de-sac.

They left the car and entered the house. He tossed the key fob on the kitchen counter and shrugged out of his sport coat as he headed upstairs.

By the time she made it down the hallway, the bedroom was empty, so

she changed into one of his T-shirts and went to the bathroom to prepare for bed.

In the middle of brushing her teeth, his face appeared in the mirror behind her. He'd changed into a T-shirt and a pair of soft, drawstring shorts, and he leaned against the door frame, arms folded across his chest.

She spit toothpaste into the sink and turned on the faucet. "By the way, I'm going to North Carolina next month," she said. "I'll be gone about a week, tops."

Finally, he broke his silence. "What kind of a photo shoot is it?"

"Not modeling." She rinsed her mouth and set the toothbrush back on its battery stand. "Research."

"Good. I won't pretend that I enjoy others looking at your half-naked body."

"It's just work."

"I still don't like it."

"You're my husband. I don't think you're supposed to."

"Sounds like you're getting comfortable with that word."

"It's growing on me," she admitted. "Let's see how we do in the next couple of days. This is only night one. Vampires have retractable fangs, right?"

"If I was a vampire, I would have climbed onto your balcony at the conference hotel, through your window, and bit you back then. With how much of a headache you caused me later that night, I'm pretty sure after one bite, I'd learn you were my fated mate."

"What kind of headache?" She faced him. "Did I mess up your date with your ex?"

"It wasn't a date."

"Did Emmaline know that? It was dinner with Emmaline, right? The brilliant surgeon?"

"Yes."

The fact that he didn't hesitate only poured more green paint onto her head.

So, his ex was brilliant.

For anyone to take her seriously, she always had to mention the research and the business ventures. Because companies paid her to look good wearing or using their products, most people assumed she had helium where a brain was supposed to be. Some days, herself included.

“Was that the ‘last time’ you slept with someone?” she asked. “That night in Greece?”

“I haven’t slept with anyone since I laid eyes on you, Raina. As I said,” he tapped his head, then his heart, “fated mate.”

“Emmaline’s the woman who came to your building the first night I spent at your condo, right? The one from the parking garage?”

His expression changed, and she searched for remnants of longing for his brilliant, accomplished ex-girlfriend.

“You weren’t sleeping,” he said.

“No.”

“Yes. That was her.”

She walked past him.

Their bodies brushed.

“Are you upset that I didn’t mention she stopped by?”

She sat on the edge of the bed.

He remained in the bathroom doorway.

“Sort of. You said you wanted to make this feel like a real marriage, but you omitting your brilliant ex stopping by feels...suspicious.”

“I wasn’t the one who said that,” he pointed out. “You were.”

For a second, she forgot which one out of the two of them was the vampire with how much force he’d used to drive that stake through her heart.

Wrong was too delicate a word.

Somewhere along the way, she’d gotten her signals so mixed up, she’d started to believe he was interested in her. Sure, he’d said so. At times, he acted like it. Tonight, however, the real Lucas Saraci stood up, tall and proud.

“So,” she grabbed a pillow and tucked it against her midsection, “sex or no sex tonight, husband?”

His brows narrowed. “Why are you acting like this? You’re being...distant.”

“I’m the one acting distant? Saraci, whenever I kiss you, you act like I offend you by touching you with my disgusting lips.”

“Don’t hand me that bullshit.”

“You’ve barely said a word to me since the restaurant.”

“And you concluded that it’s because I find you disgusting?” He unfolded his arms. “Raina, what did I do after Emmaline came by?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. I fell asleep. Maybe you went back to her place and fucked her.”

The bucket of green paint went from something she'd use to wash a car to a rainwater collection tank. Jealousy slid down the sides of her face in glops of green close to boiling point.

S-A-R-A-C-I.

He'd asked her to learn it, to spell it. He'd stormed into her sister's home and all but demanded it because he would one day be hers. *This* was why she'd agreed to the sham marriage. To prove a point. To prove this particular point.

Men were all talk.

Even the only one who ever came close to her heart didn't deserve so much as a pinch of it. Hopefully, he left soon because she felt like a jackass—one on the verge of tears.

"I bought you a house," he said, his voice so soft that her ears misconstrued it for hurt. "After Emmaline stopped by, I bought you a house."

Her lips parted.

"And don't argue that it's Miguel's," he added. "You and I both know that if you wanted me to buy one, I would have."

"I don't know that."

"Is this an act or something?"

She blinked back tears. "What, me feeling hurt? Yes, Lucas. It's an act. Having the most fun I've had in a long time when all I did was play poker with you in Vegas? An act. Looking forward to hearing from you during Fashion Week? An act. Showing up tonight because I could see how important it was to you that I was there, and that matters to me? Call me Meryl fucking Streep."

"Just say it."

"Say what, Lucas? What could I possibly say that I haven't shown you already?"

"Kissing my neck? Kissing me? Calling me baby and hubby and ordering my lunch? Hell, kissing my hand? What does any of that show me?"

"That..."

She clenched her jaw.

"That what, Raina?" he hissed. "I've never lied to you. I've never kept how I felt about you a secret. None of that shit means anything if you can't even say the words."

Perhaps she would have had she known what they were. She didn't like him. She wasn't in love with him. The word dangled somewhere between

both. Somewhere in the realm of “I want to keep experiencing the way you make me feel” and “Fighting with you isn’t something I do because I hate you.” The words skirted, “The time I spend with you is precious, even when we’re arguing with one another,” and they encompassed the same phrase he’d said to her over a year ago:

“There’s something about you.”

Marrying him was supposed to be a test—a test he was supposed to fail. Minutes ago, she’d assumed he was on his way to doing just that, to proving his little declaration had been all bullshit. That *he* was the one putting on the act, and she would be free to reel everything back in, climbing back into her cocoon of self-control, no matter how snug the chrysalis.

Now, she wasn’t sure.

“I need air,” he said.

The next thing she knew, she was alone.

Chapter Seventeen

It wasn't love.

But whatever he was feeling, he wouldn't be able to identify without a list or wheel of emotions that combined frustration with pride, appreciation, and at least a hundred pounds of lust.

How would she react if he told her that he wasn't drunk that night? If she knew how much he didn't want things to end in a few months and that he had *powerful* feelings for her that he wanted to keep exploring?

Had he not tossed the research paper on the table, would she have considered staying with him? For all he knew, she'd memorized the annulment requirements. Delilah said feelings were there, but sisters didn't have to know everything about each other.

Delilah could be wrong.

With a groan, he stopped in the middle of the sidewalk, his breaths bursting from his nose and throat as white mist. Words couldn't describe how much he hated the degree to which he wanted Raina.

He looked for her.

He came for her.

He married her.

What couldn't she see?

A gust of wind blew, reminding him he'd left the house in clothes completely inadequate for the temperature outside, but he couldn't have stayed in that bedroom if he tried. Only a savage wanted someone as badly as he wanted to put Raina on her back and leave her twitching as if electrocuted by her own orgasm.

Then she'd begged him.

Asking her to beg had been a game; he didn't need it to make love to her, but he wanted her to say that she wanted him. That she wanted more with him. It was how she acted, but he didn't want to interpret her actions.

He wanted the words.

Of every woman he'd ever dated in his adult life, Raina was the one he'd been the least certain about. Even Emmaline had come with a level of confidence that never wavered.

Emmaline would have married him, if he asked. Emmaline would have had children with him, if he asked. Regardless of her preconceived notions and prejudices, she would have overlooked his background, his disability—everything.

If he asked.

But not Hell's Tinker Bell.

Raina was her own woman in so many ways, he was beginning to wonder whether she could truly ever be his. Yet, he liked that about her, loved that about her.

There was no act.

No filter.

Tonight, sitting next to her at dinner, he'd felt zero need for pretense. Raina, the beautiful and maddening woman who'd purchased acres of his thoughts and set up real estate in his mind, hit every tier of attraction he possessed. Still, like a ridiculous teenager, he wanted to hear her say the words without any hint of teasing or joking.

Which made him an idiot.

Raina didn't put the marriage wager on the table. Raina didn't negotiate three months of matrimony. Raina, the woman of his foolish dreams, wanted a damn research paper.

Turning around, he made his way back to the house, but the sound of shuffling feet brought him to a stop, his body partially hidden behind a large oak. Wrapped in a blanket, Raina stood at the end of their driveway holding what looked like his coat, her voice riding the wind.

“Where is he? Doesn't he know how cold it is? Be mad all you want, Saraci, but be mad warm.” She shivered. “Lucas, be mad at me all you want, but please come be mad at me, at home, where it's warm.”

Apparently, he *was* the put-Raina-on-her-back-and-leave-her-twitching-as-if-electrocuted-by-her-own-orgasm kind of savage. If she didn't have feelings for him, fine, but tonight, he would wear her out. Then tomorrow.

And the next day. Plus, the one after that. If he had his way, he would fuck her for three months straight.

“Raina,” he called.

She turned.

Their gazes connected.

Then she narrowed her eyes, tossed his coat on the ground, and went back inside.

He stomped over, grabbed the coat, and followed her, the front door slamming behind him as he tossed the coat to the side. As she went to climb the stairs, he pulled her back using the T-shirt.

“Are you insane?” he asked.

“Me?” She stabbed his chest with an index finger. “You were the one who left wearing pajama shorts in thirty-degree weather. You wanted to be away from me that badly? Were you only interested in a ride on the Chocolate Express if it came without attachments?”

“Raina, I didn’t even think about having sex with you the first time I saw you. You do realize that you’re selling yourself short, right? That you’re saying I can’t possibly be attracted to your,” he crooked his fingers, “‘stellar’ personality.”

“You’re a guy.”

“Does that keep you warm at night? Make you feel safe? Does reducing me to ‘guy’ help you not acknowledge that I’ve made it very clear how I feel about you? God forbid you have to acknowledge it and feel something in return. Raina, I don’t even want my own two fucking lungs as much as I want you.”

Her chest heaved.

As far as arguing went, he was done.

“Just say it,” he hissed.

Her lips remained sealed.

“So, I was right?” He dragged the shirt off over her head, snatched off her panties, and tossed both onto the stairs. “All you want is a research paper? Recognition? Accolades?”

Riding his back instead of riding him?

“If that was all I wanted, I could go with anyone else,” she shot back. “Even one of your colleagues from dinner.”

“Try it. I will *destroy* their lives.” He spun her naked body around and nudged her backward until she toppled onto the sofa. “Open your mouth, and

say how you feel about me.”

At this point, he didn't care what it was. If she hated him, she hated him. She'd have to hate him while moaning as he buried himself inside her.

“Lucas, I...I don't think three months is enough.”

“Which means?”

“That we should have dated first.”

“Probably.” He removed his shirt, shorts, underwear. “Now, keep going.”

She exhaled, and getting his medical degree had taken less time. “But, as long as we went and got married,” she prefaced, “I...want to...stay married to you.”

He joined her on the couch. Immediately dipping his head between her legs seemed rushed, so he thumbed her clit, and his finger nearly slid right off her pussy.

“For how long?”

“I don't have a timeline,” she said. “But it's not...it's not three months.”

“What else, Raina?” He licked her sticky wetness from the pad of his thumb. “Tell me what I want to hear. I thought you were fearless.”

“I never...said I...was fearless.”

He'd been hard since she tossed his coat on the ground, and it was taking everything in him not to take a seat and sit her right on top of it. But a hot, glistening pussy lay bare before him, and he couldn't hold back any longer.

He lowered his head.

Licked.

Instantly, ten fingers were in his hair.

Either he was out of his mind, or she was sweet. So sweet. He didn't care about losing himself, didn't care that he went from licking to devouring to her riding his tongue—as best as she could while laid out on her back, anyhow.

It wasn't enough.

It wasn't nearly enough.

Without lifting his head, he slid two fingers inside her, and his name rolled from her lips in gasps and moans.

Her arousal dripped onto his palm.

He grabbed her thighs and slipped his tongue inside her. Vaguely, he heard the sound of a woman screaming, felt her thighs push uselessly against his grasp, twitching until she went stiff.

“Lucas, I'm coming.”

Her body arched.

Then she spasmed and writhed as he fingered her, lavishing in the gentle squeezes around the digit as he freed his dick. She could barely catch her breath, and she wouldn't.

Rising, he spread her legs wider and buried himself inside her. She gasped, her body closing around him.

After taking a moment to breathe—and spitting out the words “holy shit” in every language he knew—he prepared to thrust so hard the sofa fabric gave her carpet burn. But then she had to go and open her fucking mouth.

“Lucas, I wasn't drunk. The night we got married? I wasn't drunk.”

Chapter Eighteen

“What did you just say?”

Raina stared up into Lucas’ face, taking in everything from his hair to the tip of his chin, creating a snapshot of this moment in the event it was the first and last time.

“We could’ve dated, I know,” she went on. “But ever since Athens, I thought about you all the time. After you showed up at Delilah’s, it got worse. It’s how I ended up in Vegas. I knew you’d be there, and I was hoping to run into you. If I did, I planned to ask you out.”

No matter how long or how many rounds it would have taken. Unfortunately, she’d only had his tongue at this point, and his tongue by itself made her want to weld the wedding ring onto her finger.

“I had my assistant make all those posts, hoping you would show up,” he said. “Do you really think I was *that* damn excited about a conference?”

She laughed. “Maybe.”

“Repeat what you said, Rai.”

“That I wasn’t drunk?” She shook her head. “I wasn’t. I married you sober. After we ate, my buzz wore off. I remember everything.”

She betrayed him, betrayed his trust, and he seemed like the type who held grudges. However, at the moment, he was inside her and harder than concrete. They both knew him pulling out wasn’t an option; therefore, she would take this dick and go.

“Rai,” he kissed her cheek, her neck, “you weren’t drunk...and neither was I.”

The “huh” never left her mouth.

He moved, his pace steady and deep when she was prepared for rough,

angry, and hard. Then he kissed her forehead.

The space between her brows.

The bridge of her nose.

At last, his lips claimed hers.

She wrapped her arms around his neck, angled her head, and opened up so her tongue could meet his, touch his, taste his. She swallowed as much of his prickly nature as she could until he groaned and moved to her neck.

“Lucas...” She kissed the side of his face, his ear. “Oh God, Lucas.”

He mumbled an answer that ended in her name, twice, but then his mouth was on hers again, and she felt every broad inch with each stroke.

“Rai,” he nipped her top lip, “we’re staying married.”

The joke was on her—she actually thought she would have proven her point by agreeing to marry this man. She truly, honestly thought this wouldn’t have happened, them succumbing in less than a month when it was clear that their rage and desire had been nearly indistinguishable.

She cupped the side of his face, so wet she dripped onto his pelvis. “I want to be your wife,” she whispered.

“Can my wife take more?”

He’d asked, but he was already sinking further, stretching her, pushing against her walls until she felt the need to hold her breath as if that would create the space to take all of him.

“Be a good girl,” he sank all the way in, “and take your husband’s dick.”

“Yes, Lucas.”

“You’re my good girl?”

“Yes, *Lucas*.”

Slow was torment.

Slow made her heady as pleasure tugged at her nerve endings and made her feel him in places more vulnerable than inches deep inside her.

“Please.” She rolled her hips. “Faster.”

She couldn’t handle him like this.

Like this, she would come too hard.

He kissed her again and increased the depth of his stroke without increasing his pace. Whenever he slammed into her, she would have slid on the sofa cushions if he wasn’t holding her in place.

Then he gave her what she wanted.

Faster.

Harder.

He sucked on her neck and sank his fingers into her hip and thrust into her until her legs fell apart and she went limp. Their bodies remained connected as he thrust, angling between licking her neck, kissing her lips, and sucking her nipples.

“Are you coming for me?” He kissed her earlobe. “You’re coming for your husband, Rai?”

She nodded. “Yes.”

“Come all over me, Raina.”

He returned to slow and deep, to him firm and thick, his movements putting pressure on her clit and his tongue in her mouth until the orgasm hit her like a semi.

She came so hard, she gushed.

All over him.

Like a good girl.

Moaning, he released her tongue and looked down at the mess their bodies had created. “Mrs. Saraci,” he said, out of breath, “you are incredible.”

She laughed, which caused her inner muscles to contract, forcing his eyes to roll back their sockets. Then they were moving again, the quickness of his breaths so hypnotizing that she nearly forgot to tell him...

“Lucas, I’m not on the pill. You...have to...pull out.”

“Your pussy’s so fucking warm.”

She locked one leg around him. “Don’t come inside me.”

“I won’t.”

“You can’t.”

He groaned. “Mm-hmm.”

“Are you there?”

“Right...there.”

She sank her fingernails into his ass and pulled him deeper, but he pulled out at the last minute, a fist wrapped around his head. Cradling her chin, he coaxed her toward him and slid between her lips, thrusting a few times before he came, pulsing on her tongue.

She sucked.

He hissed and gave her more.

And she swallowed it all.

Like a good girl.

Once he was spent, she released him. He collapsed next to her on the sofa, and she crawled on top of him. They were both panting and covered in

sweat and other fluids, but he didn't seem to care, and she loved that he didn't seem to care.

The heat dissipated from their skin, and a rush of cold from the air vents sent goosebumps all over her body. Lucas tracing her spine evoked its own set of goosebumps.

Neither one of them said a word.

A few moments later, she looked up, expecting to see closed eyelids, but he was looking down at her.

Their breaths picked back up.

She rose, straddled his waist, angled his erection, and filled herself with sweet, sweet bliss.

He held her hips as she rotated her pelvis, riding him in steady, wavelike motions that sent jolts to her clit. While she rode, he stroked and plucked her nipples as she drew circles between her legs.

"Lucas..." She rode him harder when she felt the tightness build, felt the tug in her belly. "I'm close."

He sat up, pulled a nipple into his mouth, and drove into her from below. She met him stroke for stroke, thrust for thrust, her fingers and his hardness steadily drawing the sensation to a peak.

At the same time her climax hit, he kissed her. She cried his name, and he grabbed the back of her head and pulled her lips down onto his, both their bodies going rigid.

She pulsed around his shaft.

He throbbed against her walls.

This time, they didn't collapse. Instead, they kissed. Smiled and kissed. Laughed and kissed. Held each other and brushed lips, tangled tongues, flicked noses, and nibbled on earlobes.

Three hours later, they climbed into bed. Three minutes after they climbed into bed, he flipped her onto her belly, and she grabbed the bottom edge of the headboard in silent surrender.

* * *

The next morning, she woke up tender, achy, sore, and satisfied.

And alone.

"Lucas?" She rose onto her elbows. "Baby, are you in the bathroom?"

He entered the bedroom carrying a wooden tray. On the surface sat two plates filled with pancakes, hash browns, small dishes of fresh fruit, avocado slices, Field Roast sausages, and empty glass mugs.

“What’s all this?” she asked, sitting up, the covers wrapped around her.

“Breakfast.” He set the tray over her lap and then leaned over, pressing three soft kisses against her lips. “I still have to grab coffee and juice.”

She tilted her chin, and he kissed her again, holding each kiss longer, which caused her to smile each time their lips came together.

“Orange or cranberry juice?” he asked.

“Cranberry.”

“Feel free to start eating.”

“I’ll wait for you,” she said. “I like this mood you’re in. I want to bask in it.”

“I had a good night last night.” He walked backward to the door. “I’ve had this fantasy before.”

“Of what? Sexing me to sleep?”

“Well, that, yeah. And then bringing you breakfast.”

She grinned. “I love breakfast.”

“I knew you would.”

“Hurry back, Dr. Saraci.”

“Will do.”

Chapter Nineteen

Once was all it took.

Every day since then, sometimes multiple times a day, he was inside Raina. When he wasn't inside Raina, he thought about being inside her.

In public, he kissed her, held her, smoothed her hair, and smiled with his lips pressed to her forehead. In private, he ate her pussy until his tongue begged for mercy, thrust inside her mouth until she gagged, and they made love, had sex, and fucked until they were sore, her in many, many places. Now, she was out of town for a week, and he was barely hanging on by a thread.

MRS. SARACI

Today, we ordered our lunch from a Turkish restaurant. I got hummus and a döner gyro with yogurt sauce.

DR. LUCAS SARACI MD

Did you suggest the Turkish restaurant?

MRS. SARACI

I sure did.

DR. LUCAS SARACI MD

Almost used another one of those things.

The emotion icons.

MRS. SARACI

Now you're trolling. You know what they're called. 😏 🤔

DR. LUCAS SARACI MD

Emoji is a ridiculous word.

MRS. SARACI

So is kerfuffle. And I can see you using kerfuffle.

“Excuse me, Dr. Saraci?”

More than five minutes ago, he'd dismissed the class. This was supposed to be his personal, quiet time before he had to deal with anything else related to school, teaching, or students. The school didn't allow him to lock the door, but for the safety of their students, they might have to consider bending that rule.

He looked up.

The dark-haired student in front of him paled.

“Dr. Saraci, I just wanted to tell you that I admire your story, and I even came to Johns Hopkins because you teach here. I aspire to be like you one day.”

They expected him to beam and flush, his eyes like stars dusted with glitter over a compliment he'd received too many times to count, almost verbatim.

“Where was I born?” he asked.

The student cleared her throat. “Ah...um...Turkey, but you grew up in Baltimore. That’s why you came back here to teach after attending medical school at Georgetown and then doing your residency at Mount Sinai. ”

“Where in Baltimore?”

“Harbor East, right?”

In no interview, podcast appearance, or book had he ever mentioned what part of Baltimore he was from. People always assumed Harbor East or Fell’s Point because they were on the wealthier side, but seeing as how he’d fabricated his entire childhood, it would take submarine-level deep diving for someone to learn he was from West Baltimore.

The truth was that he grew up in a ranch-style home with four bedrooms and one bathroom, a roof that leaked during every storm, pet chickens in the backyard, and a chainlink fence that couldn’t keep air out if it tried. Today, if dropped into a different neighborhood, that same rinky-dink house would be considered charming, especially after jacking up the price by four or five hundred thousand.

“You want to be a surgeon?” he asked.

The student nodded. “Yes, I do. When I was a kid, my mother had a disease that doctors kept telling her was all in her head. By the time it showed up on her tests and scans, she had to be rushed into surgery. The surgery was botched, and even though a different surgeon went in to fix it, she died a few years later from complications from the first procedure. I was ten.”

His demeanor went from a rusty metal pipe to rabbit’s fur.

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“It was hard.” The student’s eyes misted over. “It still is, but my extended family is very supportive. We rallied around each other. What I remember most is overhearing the doctors talking about the second surgeon, how she was unskilled and unqualified.”

“Yet, she was one of the best physicians you’d ever come across, wasn’t she?”

She nodded. “She was.”

“What’s your name?”

“Odina, but my friends call me Didi.”

“Odina, you want to be a surgeon, right?”

“Yes, sir.”

The side of his mouth twitched. “Then go study.”

“Right! Yes. Well,” Odina took a few steps back, “have a good rest of your day, Dr. Saraci.”

He nodded. “You do the same.”

MRS. SARACI

What are you doing today? Just teaching?

DR. LUCAS SARACI MD

Yes.

MRS. SARACI

Miss me yet?

DR. LUCAS SARACI MD

Yes.

The second the message changed from “delivered” to “read,” discomfort set in. It was easier when they were faking or joking, when there was no need to sit and stew in his vulnerability—or when she was snug around him.

DR. LUCAS SARACI MD

I haven't opened the boxes for the coffee table or bookcase. I could use your claws.

MRS. SARACI

Use your fangs.

And I miss you too.

He smiled.

Then, although he knew the classroom was empty, he looked up. The students weren't allowed to see him smile. If Raina thought he was a vampire, they were supposed to see him as an evil Jinn.

DR. LUCAS SARACI MD

I would, but it's not a full moon.

Or, however that works.

I won't be able to function until you come home tomorrow.

MRS. SARACI

About that...

Ten minutes passed, and no new messages came through. She'd said she would be back on Saturday. If she didn't come back, who was to say she would return at all?

DR. LUCAS SARACI MD

Leaving me already?

Thirty minutes later, there was still nothing.

Eventually, he had to hide his phone in his leather bag to prevent himself

from checking it like an obsessed maniac.

“Knock, knock.” Delilah entered the lecture hall, descended the steps, and set her things down on one of the front-row desks. “Hello, dear brother-in-law. How’s it going?”

He grumbled a response.

She studied him, head cocked to the side. “Interesting. Usually, you’re at ornery level seven. Today, I sense a level nine. Did something happen?”

“Have you heard from your sister today?”

“Earlier, yeah. Why?”

“She won’t text me back.”

“Did you call her?”

“No.”

“You didn’t call her?”

“Don’t judge me.” He ran his fingers through his hair. “I don’t like this. How do you deal with this?”

“What, severe anxiety?”

“I don’t have anxiety.”

“Uh, sure.” She looked around. “Where’s your phone?”

“In there.” He tried to gesture to his bag but managed only a limp flick of his fingers. “It’s been in there for the last half hour or so.”

“When’s the last time you checked your phone?”

“About a half hour ago.”

“Dr. S, if you haven’t checked your phone, how do you know she hasn’t texted you back?” Delilah, mumbling something under her breath, searched the bag until she found his phone.

He rattled off his passcode.

“One new message,” she said. “It’s from somewhere called ‘Échelon’? It’s for fifteen percent off your next purchase. Do you really shop at a store called Échelon?”

He left the desk and went to lean against the room’s front wall. “She hasn’t responded. She’s not coming back.”

“In a way, it’s refreshing to see you like this.”

“This isn’t Fashion Week,” he argued. “She’s in North Carolina. Plus, she was texting me just fine, and then...nothing.”

“We can call her and find out.”

He didn’t respond.

Sighing, Delilah raised the phone to her ear and waited a beat. “Hey,

Raina, it's Lilah calling from Dr. S's phone. He's having a panic attack. Please call him back. Love you, bye."

She ended the call.

He gestured to the phone. "See?"

Delilah rolled her eyes, set his phone on his desk, and retrieved hers. Then she placed a call, her eyes narrowed in his direction. They'd one-hundred percent gotten too close if he dared to look pitiful in front of her. He barely looked pitiful in front of his mirror.

"Hey, Raina. It's Lilah again. I'm just calling you from my phone because Dr. S is still having a panic attack and thinks you didn't pick up because it was his number." She ended the call and tossed her phone with her stuff. "See? She's busy. It's not unusual for us to go an entire day without hearing from her."

"How do you know she's not dead in a ditch somewhere?" he asked.

"You sound like my mother."

He sounded like his own mother:

"Anneciğim, people do not disappear. What if he is dead in a ditch somewhere? Lucas, your father would not leave like this. What if he is dead?"

"Dr. S, you haven't told me to get out once. I'm worried. Should I call an ambulance?"

Why was this even a thing?

He'd dealt with the absence of his parents. As he grew older, he'd learned that his father hadn't tried to fix his health due to complex post-traumatic stress disorder.

On the other hand, while his mother had worked hard for the family, emotionally, she was often absent, but she'd lost a husband overnight. Then, while she'd always wanted to live in the U.S., it had still been a new and unfamiliar country. It wasn't unusual that, as the oldest, she'd treated him more coldly than his younger siblings.

At the end of her life, they'd fixed their relationship. She apologized for not being more nurturing and had reassured him that, regardless of how she had appeared, she'd loved him with every breath she took. Peace followed her into the afterlife, and he let go of his contempt. For him, understanding and resolution had brought its own sense of peace.

People leaving him wasn't a fear. If Raina never wanted to come back, that was her right, but it was also his right to track her down like a bloodhound.

Delilah's mouth twisted into a sorrowful smile that only made him feel worse. "Dr. S, is there a reason you think Raina wouldn't come back?"

He shook his head. "No."

"False."

"Fine, then. Me. Maybe I didn't do enough. Things can seem perfectly fine, and then someone leaves. Things are good between your sister and I, but that doesn't mean she's happy."

Plus, dick wasn't enough of an incentive.

It was good dick, especially if her moans, squirming, and near-instant post-orgasmic slumbers were any indication, but this was Raina. Raina did what-the-hell-ever she wanted, and the most frustrating aspect of her personality was one of the things he adored most about her.

Still, what else could he have done?

There was zero tension in the house, the air lighter than helium. It was possible that he didn't hold her enough, but whenever they tried to "cuddle," they ended up naked, panting, and sticky. Then, there were the times he'd tried to give her a massage, and she ended up bent over the back of the sofa. She'd tried to return the favor, give him one, but he'd somehow wound up coming down her throat.

He returned to the desk and dropped into the chair. Worrying about something like this was trivial and embarrassing. All that he'd accomplished, and he was acting like a ten-year-old.

"I remember you telling me that your dad left," Delilah pointed out.

He groaned. "And I regret it every day."

"You're saying it's not relevant?"

"It's not."

"Give me five reasons Raina wouldn't come back. Five measurable reasons, not speculation."

"North Carolina is her home."

"Not measurable."

"The mortgage on her place—"

"Doesn't exist. It's a modest cottage-style home she bought, renovated, and paid off about three years ago."

"I don't like this game."

“Because you don’t like to lose. Games or people.”

“Who does?”

Delilah slid onto his desk. “Dr. S, Raina likes you, and you’re clinically obsessed with her. That’s a lot of leg to stand on.”

“Again, why am I discussing these things with you?” he asked, although it was nice to have someone not keen on judging him to vent to.

“Who else would you discuss it with?”

“My diary.”

Laughing, she grabbed a miniature Kit-Kat from yet another unnecessary candy dish he kept on his desk and extended it in his direction. She didn’t let up until he took it, opened the package, and popped it into his mouth. Eating candy probably suited him and his current state of childish behavior.

“Want to hear something funny?” she asked.

“No.”

“I’ve done this with my brother countless times, talked him through his feelings and helped him process his emotions. If you need a good cry,” she tapped her shoulder, “I’m here for you.”

“You’re joking,” he glanced up at her, “but I appreciate it.”

“It was scary for me too, Dr. S.”

“What was?”

“Falling in love.”

The door to the lecture hall opened.

Emmaline entered, pausing before descending the steps, and he figured the entire scene had to be unusual. She’d never seen him do anything as casual as allowing a student to sit on his desk.

While he didn’t care what anyone thought about him, he didn’t want those same people thinking something inappropriate was going on between him and Delilah. He’d already had to set John Nelson straight a couple of times.

“Miss Daniels, right?” Emmaline approached as if he and Delilah regularly spit venom at interlopers. “Can I speak to Luke privately for a moment?”

Delilah slid off his desk. “Of course.”

She grabbed her things, and he watched her leave, knowing she would be waiting just outside to further torment him about his infatuation with her sister.

The kid was special.

He stood. “What can I do for you, Em?”

Emmaline leaned her hip against the side of his desk. “I came to check on you. You didn’t seem like yourself when we ran into each other this morning. Is it,” she drew a circle on the desktop, “the mystery woman?”

“She’s not a mystery.”

“You haven’t told me anything about her.”

“Why would I discuss my marriage with my ex-girlfriend?”

“Your marr...” Her gaze fell to his hand and the ring circling his fourth finger, and she pushed up off his desk. Lips slightly parted, she stroked her bare ring finger, then glanced over her shoulder at the exit before turning back to him. “When did you get married?”

He didn’t hate this woman. He didn’t love her anymore, but that didn’t mean he hated her. Despite what his students might claim, he wasn’t a monster, so he didn’t exactly enjoy seeing the hurt on her face, but he would never lie to her about Raina, of all people, solely for her benefit.

“Recently,” he said.

Her voice rose a few notches. “Why didn’t you say anything? How do you go from ‘I met a woman’ to being married to this woman in no time at all?”

“No time at all? How long should I have waited, then?”

“Uh...three years, maybe?”

Three years was how long they’d lasted, and in those three years, all she’d done for him was book a trip to the Bahamas for his birthday because it was where she wanted to go. He’d enjoyed himself—it was hard not to in *the Bahamas*—but had it been a trip for him, they would have wound up at Hobbiton in New Zealand.

“Emmaline, you’re an accomplished woman. It’s a little odd that you’re, essentially, complaining that I moved on.”

“I’m not complaining,” she argued. “Really, I’m not. I’m just worried about you. You’ve never been this...careless.”

“You think me getting married is careless?” Technically, it was, but she didn’t have enough details to make those kinds of judgments.

“Who is she, Luke? Is she a physician? Does she work here?” She raised an eyebrow. “Does she attend school here?”

He tipped his chin at the door. “Feel free to leave at any point in this conversation, Em.”

“Interesting avoidance of the question.”

“What do you think I owe you?”

“It’s not about what you owe me. I still care about you. Is it wrong that I don’t want to see you make decisions that might jeopardize your career?”

“Like what?” He raised his left hand. “Getting married?”

“You’re not usually this stupid, Luke.”

The word struck a chord the size of Brazil, but he tamped down his initial reaction. Those days were far in the past, and he had proof of his accomplishments, of his abilities.

“I’m happy,” he said.

“So, a relationship with me depressed you?”

“No.”

“None of this makes sense...unless it’s a money thing. I thought it was a rumor, but,” she gestured to him, “I see it’s true. How does it feel to be a billionaire’s son-in-law?”

Being Raina’s husband felt like he needed a twelve-step program to guide him on functioning without her, even for a period as short as a week. How was it possible to crave another human being like this? Raina was in an entirely different state, and he could still feel her skin on his palms.

“Wait until she finds out you’re rude, obnoxious, and selfish,” Emmaline continued. “Your best traits are your intelligence and your looks, which are *just* good enough for a woman to overlook everything else.”

A smartwatch.

He’d get a smartwatch.

That way, he wouldn’t need to have his phone nearby to check any notifications that Raina had responded. Yet, as far as he knew, Audemars didn’t make smartwatches.

“Luke, are you even listening to me?”

He wasn’t.

“Will you ever give me a straight answer?”

Neither straight nor curved.

“Luke?”

“Do you remember that time we were in D.C. for the BioSoft event?” he asked. “During the break, we went walking near Dupont Circle.”

She smiled. “I do. It was a beautiful day out.”

“A man approached us. He was hairy, dirty, homeless. He recognized me from the clinic. Do you remember?”

“Do I remember a random homeless man?”

“You don’t remember anything you said to him? The way you talked to him?”

“Why would I remember that?”

“He approached us because he recognized me and was having chest pains, but I walked away. I walked away because I was hell-bent on being a condescending, egotistical asshole.” He tapped his chest. “I took an oath, and I almost let someone die because of my ego. That makes me a piece of shit, Emmaline. The same kind of piece of shit who would have let his best friend die had I been his doctor.”

She set her hand on his shoulder, but he shrugged it off. Khalid’s cancer had one of the highest survival rates of all cancers, but both good and bad doctors failed him.

Dr. A, one of the “good” ones, had paid more attention to his patients and his son’s medicine-loving friend, while Khalid’s mother had prayed but didn’t do much else. It wasn’t until it was too late that a doctor so much as looked Khalid in the eyes. It was as if they couldn’t understand why a poor Muslim immigrant from Africa would deserve healthy lung tissue.

He’d promised Khalid, the last day they were together and talking about that biotech firm they were supposed to start, that he wouldn’t forget *people*. The purpose of their biotech firm had been to combine medicine and technology to drive innovative treatments and cures, especially for global diseases.

And what did he do?

Drank privilege through a straw and gave a silent “fuck you” to the promise he’d made to his dying best friend. Then, his arrogance nearly cost his very own father his life.

Back then, he’d genuinely believed that the truth about who his family was would have weighed heavier than his father’s blood on his hands.

He loved his father.

He never stopped loving his father.

Yet, he nearly killed him.

For social status.

Several years ago, Dr. Akello left the clinic in his hands, but only in the last few years did he feel deserving of such a gesture. As far as he was concerned, a lifetime wouldn’t be nearly long enough to attain forgiveness for his failures, but making up with his mother steered him back onto that path.

The path where Raina stood waiting.

With or without Raina, he still would have ambition and goals. His wife was not, and would never be, his mother. However, Raina was who he wanted, the kind of woman he'd dreamed of dating, never mind marrying, and it had nothing to do with who her father was.

Raina was lovely.

Compassionate, intelligent, and so damn lovely.

Once upon a time, he'd loved Emmaline because she was beautiful, and they could have intense discourse about topics in medicine, but Emmaline's background was similar to the one he faked. Because she believed they came from similar circumstances, she never held her tongue about what she thought of people like his family or those he cared about. To make matters worse, he never corrected her.

Had he walked away from Ozzie complaining of chest pain when he was with Raina, she would have elegantly told him to "eff off" and die, taken Ozzie to the hospital, and then left his ass high and dry.

Rightfully so.

"Emmaline, I love my wife. She knows I'm rude, obnoxious, and selfish." She fixed his rude and obnoxious tie, played in his rude and obnoxious hair, and kissed his rude, obnoxious, and selfish lips. "But she also knows that every day I wake up, my goal is to become a better man than I was the day before."

It made sense to say he loved Raina. They were married. People generally fell in love and then got married. No one had to know they'd skipped a significant portion of those events.

"Is she worth all this?" Emmaline asked.

"Em," he huffed a laugh, "she's worth more than everything."

His phone rang, and he unceremoniously snatched it off the desk, told Emmaline to give him a moment, and walked to the far end of the lecture hall.

"Hey, baby," Raina greeted.

A flush warmed his body. "Who's around you that you have to pretend you like me?"

"A lot of nosy university researchers."

"So, you *have* to talk to me like I'm the husband you're in love with?" He ran his fingernails over the coarse hairs along his jawline. "Interesting. Hi, sweetheart. I miss you."

“I miss you too, baby.”

His heart fell backward into a daisy-covered meadow, arms splayed and legs kicking. “What did you mean in your message earlier? Is work going to take longer than anticipated?”

“Yeah. I won’t be back until next Wednesday.”

“Wednesday? But you’re coming back, right?”

“Yeah. Why? You thought I wouldn’t?”

“It crossed my mind.”

“I love being with you, Lucas.”

Maybe there was an upside to her being away for work. When people were around, she said things he would never have heard otherwise.

“I only had a moment to check in,” she said. “I’ll call you later when we’re done, okay?”

He nodded. “Okay. Thanks for checking in.”

“Your panic attack’s gone?”

“It wasn’t a...yes, it’s gone.”

“Good. Talk to you later, baby. I love you.”

He nearly collapsed where he stood. “I love you too, Rai.”

She hung up.

Once the world stopped spinning, he returned to his desk to find Emmaline’s spot vacant.

“Knock, knock, part two.” Delilah poked her head through the door. “All done? I figured we should walk out together instead of me waiting for you at your car with us being brother and sister and all.”

“Delilah...”

“I know, I know. You don’t enjoy being happy. Tell me something I don’t know.”

“Something you don’t know? What’s the significance of Schwann cells and oligodendrocytes when attempting to diagnose a thirty-one-year-old male patient with a history of optic neuritis and progressive weakness in their lower extremities? This is a question I remember from my exams.”

He collected his things and joined her at the top of the steps. After a silent exchange about who would leave first, she sighed and exited while he followed.

“I asked you a question, Daniels.”

“I’m thinking, I’m thinking.” They started down the long, checkered-floor hallway, which was virtually empty at this time of the afternoon on this

side of the building. “I know both nerve cells do pretty much the same thing depending upon which nervous system we’re talking about.”

“Which is which?”

“Schwann cells are...peripheral?”

“Are you asking me or telling me?”

They passed Emmaline’s office, and she glanced up, briefly making eye contact with him. Then, her gaze fell to Delilah and held until the college’s plain, off-white walls replaced the open doorway.

“Schwann cells are peripheral,” Delilah said, firmer. “Oligodendrocytes are part of the central nervous system.”

“So, what’s your answer?”

“What other symptoms do they have?”

“For several months, they’ve been getting sensations in their legs as if ‘walking through water.’ The morning before their appointment, they thought they were wearing socks but looked down to find their feet bare.”

“So, progressive muscle weakness and neuropathy. Any fatigue?”

“Fatigue, brain fog, and mild dysphasia.”

“Labs?”

“ANA is elevated, but only slightly, and the CMP and CBC are normal, but remember what I told you about that?”

“Treat the patient. Always treat the patient. Labs are a useful tool, but they’re still only one part of the puzzle.” She struck her index finger against an invisible surface. “Okay, so considering the involvement of the CNS and the history of optic neuritis, along with the progressive muscle weakness, I would include multiple sclerosis in my differential diagnosis.”

The exit doors took them to a raised walkway surrounded by walls made of glass. When he first started working at the university, he would stop on his way home and take a moment to stare out at the campus. At night, it looked like its own city, the lights funneled toward the areas of campus where students studied late into the night.

Sometimes, he missed those days.

Most days, he didn’t miss those times.

“How would you follow up?” he asked. “Spinal tap?”

She frowned. “Not to start. You always say to go from least to most invasive when possible to minimize the patient’s discomfort. I’d get the patient’s history and run more tests to rule out other possible autoimmune conditions and anything bacterial, metabolic, or viral.”

“What’s one bacterial possibility?”

“Lyme disease.”

“Viral?”

“Um...advanced HIV/AIDS can produce an immune response that may look similar to MS.”

“What bacterium causes Lyme disease?”

“That’s a trick question. There are two: *Borrelia burgdorferi* and *Borrelia mayonii*, although the latter is rare.”

Pride swelled in his chest. “And you’d only do the tests?”

“I’d also schedule an MRI to check for lesions in the brain, spinal cord, or both.” She looked up at him. “How’d I do?”

“You haven’t answered the question. What’s the significance of the oligodendrocytes?”

“Oligodendrocytes are glial cells,” she explained. “They produce myelin.”

“Which is?”

“The protective coating around the nerve cell. Kind of like the insulation around an electrical wire.”

“Which does what?”

“Helps the nerve cell transmit signals.”

“And in the case of MS?”

“In MS, the immune system attacks the myelin, so we’d see dysfunction and cell death of oligodendrocytes.”

“Are there any drugs currently being tested that show a possibility of promoting myelin sheath repair?”

She looked over at him, blinked twice.

“Too advanced?” he asked.

“A little.”

“Did anything else happen with your car?”

She paused, no doubt to reset her brain. “No, thank goodness. It’s only the electrical system.”

Until the repairs to her car were done, he’d volunteered to take her home. On the days he wasn’t at the university, it would mean him going out of his way to pick her up and then heading in the opposite direction of the new house, but this was about his wife’s kid sister’s safety.

They arrived at his car, and Delilah slid in like he’d been taking her home after classes since elementary school.

He tossed their stuff onto the backseat before getting in behind the wheel. “Do you have a gun?” he asked, the engine roaring to life. “Some days, you leave campus kind of late.”

Delilah shook her head. “Uh...no.”

“Taser? Combat knife? Freshly-sharpened pencil?”

She reached into the backseat, searched her bag, and pulled out a banana that looked like it had once belonged to a prehistoric monkey. “I have this,” she said. “It might not be sharp or sturdy, but if I shove this down an attacker’s throat, the gastrointestinal upset they’ll get will be as dangerous as a combat knife.”

He laughed but kept his laugh quieter than the engine’s low, steady hum as he pulled out of the parking garage. Sometimes, she reminded him of Khalid. Others, she reminded him of his sister Marianne. If that didn’t mean he was supposed to marry into this family, he didn’t know what would.

“So, Dr. S,” she leaned back against the seat, “how’d I do on your little pop quiz?”

“You did well,” he said. “I’m proud of you.”

“Isn’t there some movie called ‘Revenge of the Body Snatchers’ or something like that?”

“It’s *Invasion* of the Body Snatchers, Delilah.”

“Okay, yeah. It’s about people being replaced with, like, weird clones or something, right? Did you see it in theaters as a kid?”

“The first movie came out in the fifties,” he informed her. “The remake came out in the late seventies.”

“And when were you born again?”

“Do you want to walk home?”

She laughed, obviously pleased with herself. “I’ve just never heard you say you were proud of me. I had to ask. By the way, did Raina call you? You know she won’t be back until Wednesday, right?”

“Don’t remind me.”

“Don’t you have friends? Maybe you can hang out with friends this weekend and go golfing. Or big-game hunting. Or to the park to drink chardonnay and listen to Mozart. I don’t know your process.”

“My golf clubs are in the shop, we drink sherry and listen to Rachmaninoff, and my Elmer Fudd rifle is being fixed,” he quipped. “And if you tell me you don’t know who Elmer Fudd is, I will ignite where I sit.”

“I’m only two weeks away from twenty-four.”

“Do you or do you not know who Elmer Fudd is, Delilah?”

She folded her lips together.

He clutched his chest. “Oh, God.”

She burst out laughing, leaning forward until her forehead touched the glove compartment. If he and the rest of the Daniels family ended up seeing eye to eye, Raina would be having his children.

If they wanted children.

Still, for two people who repeatedly said they didn’t, he’d come inside her more times than he could count, and most of those times were with her legs locked around him as she moaned, “*Come inside me, Lucas. I want to have your baby.*”

“I have colleagues, not friends,” he said. Aside from medicine, his expertise was in keeping people at arm’s length. “And yes, I do drink wine, at home, and I occasionally listen to classical music.”

“What else do you listen to? If you say hip-hop, *I’ll ignite in my seat.*”

“I don’t know if your generation would call it hip-hop. The artists I listen to actually open their mouths when they rhyme.”

“*Rhyme? You’re not Dr. S anymore. You’re now Luc with a C. Tone Luc. Give me some names, Tone Luc.*”

He pointed, a laugh dangerously close to slipping out. “There’s your building.”

“Way at the end of the street. Give me some names. Snoop?”

He didn’t respond.

Her jaw dropped. “You listen to *Snoop*? What about A Tribe Called Quest?”

He still didn’t respond.

“Dr. S!” She slapped the side of his arm. “Wu-Tang? Mos Def? Warren G?”

“How do you know all these names?”

“My mother! Look, my folks are going to love you, especially Momma. Consider this your official invite to our house for the holidays.”

He’d met her family, although it wasn’t in any formal capacity. They were kind, and there was more than enough love to go around. With his wife away from his side for a week and then some, it was nice to think about them still being together for the holidays.

He pulled up in front of Delilah’s building. “You’re home. Now, get out.”

“If you get lonely, Guel will be here this weekend.” She grabbed her bag

and slipped the strap over her shoulder. “We can stop by the house.”

“I don’t want company.”

“We’ll bring food.”

“You’re not invited.”

“Of course I am. I’m your sister.” She faced him. “And, you know, there’s this thing called a bus. You might have heard of it. I don’t live that far from campus. If you’re busy, I can take one or call an Uber.”

“If I show up and you’re not there, we’re going to have problems,” he warned. “I don’t want to have to face your sister’s wrath if something happens to you.”

Or face his own grief.

She grabbed the door handle. “Fine, fine. Good night, Tone Luc.”

“Good night, Delilo.”

“I don’t hate it. *Delilo* and *Stitch*. You have heard of that movie, right?”

“Get out.”

Laughing so hard she snorted, she shut the door, and he waited until he saw her enter the building before pulling off.

As he headed home, the itch to book a ticket to North Carolina burned in his palms and fingertips just as a message popped up on his console.

MRS. SARACI

Thinking about you.



DR. LUCAS SARACI MD



Chapter Twenty

They needed more money.

While she could always inject more capital into their research funding from her own pockets, even her income was limited compared to the sheer size of their future plans. Essentially, she could drain every asset she had, and it still would only be seed money.

They needed more grants.

Donations.

Endowments.

Collaborations with private companies. One private company, in particular, could assuage nearly all their financial woes, and they'd reached a point where she could no longer afford to be stubborn.

"You're going to have to ask, Raina," the institute's CFO, Lorelei Glenside, said. "I'm not asking you to 'beg Daddy' for money, but wasn't this the point of him starting his foundation? To help fledglings like us?"

At the moment, the "institute" was two rooms at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill—a meeting space and the small office she and Lorelei shared that was currently piled high with boxes.

They only had three staff on-site: her, Lorelei, and an intern who would be graduating in December. The rest worked virtually, most of them based in the DMV area, and the plan was to move primary operations to the D.C. area, where they would have more opportunities to network with larger, more established institutions.

For that, they needed clout.

To get clout, they needed money.

"And what about Lucas Saraci? He could put his initials on this," Lorelei

drew an L and an S in the air, “and that by itself would help us out a bunch. Imagine having Anthony Fauci on your biomedical research team.”

“Saraci isn’t as well known as Fauci,” Raina said.

“He’s young. He could be one day.” Lorelei rolled her chair out from under her desk. “Rai, we have everything at our fingertips. We’ve been talking about this for too long; it’s time to take action. If we wait any longer, we might miss our chance to do important, meaningful work. I’m with you, but I also have bills to pay and a child to take care of.”

Raina scrubbed at her face with both hands. At the moment, the rest of the team believed Delilah introduced her to Lucas and that he’d taken an interest in their research because of an overlap with eating disorders that might arise after head and neck cancer treatment. No one knew it had gone further than that.

“Fine, I’ll talk to my father.”

Lorelei pumped a fist. “Yes! And what about Lucas?”

“Lorelei, what I’m about to tell you can’t get to the rest of the team. Not yet.”

“He backed out, didn’t he?”

“Not quite.” She sighed. “Lucas Saraci and I...sort of...hit it off.”

Lorelei angled her head. “Okay, so I’m going from Lorelei, the CFO, to Lorelei, the friend from college. When you say hit it off, you mean...”

Raina retrieved her wedding ring from the pocket of her dress pants, where it had felt sacrilege to keep it, and slipped it onto her finger.

Lorelei’s eyes widened. “Married?”

“Yes.”

“When?”

“Not that long ago.”

“Was there a ceremony?”

“No. It was just us.”

“Now for the most important question,” Lorelei prefaced. “Are you happy? I’ve been reading up on Saraci, and it’s hard to get a read on him. Either he’s as benevolent as benevolent comes, or he’s the dark, mysterious, don’t-fuck-with-me type.”

She needed no time to think about it. The answer hit her over the head the minute the question left Lorelei’s mouth.

“I’m happy,” she said. “And he’s both. He’s kind. He’s just...human. We all adapt in our own ways to deal with the different pockets of the world we

encounter.”

Like most people, Lucas kept his guard up until he knew what he was dealing with, which was what he'd done with her in Greece.

However, once he realized she wasn't someone who would be impressed by his ego, he'd switched gears, and she wondered whether he was aware that he'd shown her a little bit of who he truly was, even back then.

She missed him.

Immensely.

She and Lorelei chatted for a while longer, which was mainly her fielding questions about her and Lucas' relationship and swearing Lorelei to silence. A rumor wasn't how she wanted everyone to find out about who she was beginning to learn was the love of her life.

O.B. used to tease her that there didn't seem to be a man alive who could handle her, but Demon Raina wasn't her entire persona. Demon Raina was who her siblings saw because she was the oldest. She loved O.B. and Delilah with a fierceness that could only be surpassed should she ever become a parent herself.

Yet, when she removed her horns, she lay in bed dreaming about the day she found someone to fight some of those battles with her. Perhaps, even one day, fight some of them for her. Luckily, Lucas was strong enough that they didn't need anyone else but each other to bring the world to its knees.

Later that evening, Lorelei called an impromptu meeting to inform the rest of the team of their plans regarding Lucas and her father. Raina took the call from her garage, and at the end of the meeting, she listened to everyone's happy chatter until she was the last person on the line.

They were excited that things were looking up and relieved that their jobs might not be in jeopardy, and she took that as a reminder of one of the reasons she couldn't let her pride block her efforts. Had it not been for her love for her mother, she would have sidestepped, juked, and shoved aside modeling, and gone straight into research.

She grabbed her things and entered the house that had been *home* for years but now felt like mere walls and a foundation. First, she tried Lucas, but the call went to voicemail, so she took a shower and returned to the kitchen in search of a semblance of a dinner.

The last time they spoke, he didn't seem upset that she'd had to extend her trip. She had even convinced him that “nosy researchers” had been listening to their conversation, giving her the space to be more unguarded

with him.

They'd made love, had sex, fucked—and then did some things that didn't have a name—but that was a different level of vulnerable. Once she was naked, all her reservations disappeared, evidenced by the fact that she'd let this man dump half a bottle of lube massage oil all over her ass and slide between her cheeks.

Multiple times.

And enjoyed it.

Drunk on passion and vibrating with ecstasy, she'd told him, also multiple times, that she wanted to have his baby. Had her body housed a village, the residents would have had to erect a reservoir to house all that Lucas gave her, and there she'd been, legs locked around him, taking it all.

She'd had to remove tracks, micro links, and braids, so the minute she arrived in North Carolina, she'd gotten mini-twists, fully expecting to go home and have her head snapped back.

And enjoy it.

Despite not having an appetite, especially now that she had to approach her father and ask for money she knew he would give her, she spread avocado and hemp seeds on toast and made a cup of peppermint tea. While she ate, she reread the notes Lucas placed in her luggage before she left Maryland:

What's the spell?

What did you do?

You're still here, and I already know I'll miss you.

- Yours,

Lucas

Man, you're gorgeous, Rai.

*So gorgeous.
I can't believe you're mine.
Now, I'm watching you sleep.
I've become one of "those" guys.*

*- Yours,
Lucas*

*I hope you won't be gone too long. I've gotten used to
your snoring.*

And your claws.

Your barbs.

Your sneers.

Your eye rolls.

Your frowns.

Your skin.

Your scent.

And your smile.

Really, Rai, what did you do?

You're still here, and I already know I'll miss you.

*- All yours,
Lucas*

Before she knew it, her face was covered in tears. Lucas had come along and changed so much. He'd changed everything.

Her phone rang.

Peppermint tea went one way, and she made a mental note to reach for her phone a little less aggressively whenever she suspected he might be calling.

"Hey," she said, wiping her eyes and leaving the table to grab paper towels.

He yawned. "I'm sorry I missed your calls, bunny."

She laughed. "It's okay. You were busy."

"I'm rarely too busy for you. What are you up to? How'd it go today?"

She switched to speakerphone and sopped up the spilled tea. "Would you mind making a slight amendment to our agreement? Everyone at the research institute's asking about you, and I believe they're beginning to think I lied about our collaboration. I know we agreed to three months—"

"But that's changed, hasn't it?" He yawned again. "I'm certain we've already established that we've decided to grow old together."

"Have we?"

"Yes, we have."

"What if I lose all my hair, my teeth, and I sag in places where I anatomically shouldn't be able to?"

"I'm eleven years older than you," he said. "I'll still be chasing you down for a taste."

She laughed harder, the muscles in her stomach clenching. "Thank you, Lucas. I needed that laugh."

"You're welcome, babe. Did something happen today?"

"I have to ask my father for money."

"Rai, he'll give it to you."

"That's the problem. How many people in my position wouldn't have such an easy way out? How can I say I've worked hard for what I've accomplished if I run to my father whenever there's a problem?"

A car door closed, and then she heard him mumble something to someone who replied in a youthful, masculine voice several levels above his.

"You're not asking your father to repay your gambling debts," he said. "You're asking him to fund vital research. Research that could influence everything from health economics to health equity. Think of it that way. What can you accomplish because of everything he's accomplished? I would

gladly redo everything I've done and all the obstacles I've overcome if I knew it would make things a little easier for my children. Everything doesn't have to be a climb, Rai, especially if you'll be at the top of the hill throwing down ropes and equipment to help others get up there with you."

She tossed the wet paper towels in the trash, poured a second cup of tea, and leaned against the kitchen counter, staring into the mug as the leaves steeped.

Salaries and livelihoods were at stake. Plus, her father had repeatedly told her, O.B., Delilah, and even Carson and Miguel that he was a resource. To come to him. He wanted to invest in them because he raised them to care about others, to care about the future.

Before him, his family had known only poverty. As far as O.B. Daniels Sr. was concerned, those generations of poverty would end with him.

"I never knew all this was hidden underneath that arrogant doctor," she teased.

"I knew it was there once upon a time," he said. "I was afraid that it might have been lost forever."

"I understand why you approached me the way you did. I would have fallen in love if you'd left me cute notes or talked me through my feelings early on."

"What about now? Could it still work? I wouldn't mind you falling in love."

A notification popped up on her phone from the doorbell, and she squinted at the screen, positive she was seeing incorrectly.

"Lucas? Where are you?"

"Outside."

"Outside our place in Baltimore?"

"No, ma'am."

She unlocked the door from her phone.

The door handle turned, and then he appeared in her entryway, bags in hand, dressed in a coat, sweater, jeans, and boots, all black from head to toe.

"I know you said I'd greet you on my knees, but..." She ran over to him, leaped into his arms, and planted kisses all over his face before settling on his mouth, thrusting her tongue between his lips.

She directed him to her bedroom, where she dragged him out of his clothes, and he tugged her out of hers. Then she coaxed him onto his back, kissed her way down his body, and wrapped her lips around his stiff erection.

The twists fell in front of her face, but he reached down and drew them into a ponytail. While she bobbed her head, hollowing her cheeks, she looked up into his eyes, and he watched her from slits, his lashes as dark and thick as the hair curling onto his forehead.

She wasn't sure if there was such a thing as a perfect penis, but his was undoubtedly made for her body. No matter where he put it, her body eagerly devoured him in a match between pain and pleasure.

However, in her mouth, there was no pain.

There was only his coated shaft and her moans, and each time he tossed his head back and hissed. If a twisted strand fell, he scooped it back up into the ponytail, angling his head as if needing to see her swallow him from multiple angles.

She let him slide out of her mouth and moved her lower, stroking his thick length while she sucked on his heavy sac. Next to her head, the muscles in his thighs twitched, and he let out a groan so low and filled with need, she nearly climaxed.

"I want to come in your mouth," he said, his voice hoarse and several notches lower than usual.

She licked the seam of his sac. "You come where I tell you."

"Down your throat."

"If that's what I want."

She stopped stroking.

The muscle in his jaw drew into a tight knot, and his fingers curled into the sheets.

"You want to come, baby?" She licked the length of his shaft. "You're so hard, baby. You must really want to come."

She sucked on his head.

He groaned.

"Lucas, it feels like you really, really want to come." She sucked again. "Damn, baby. You're so hard."

"What do you want?"

"Control." She resumed her strokes, using both hands, and flicked his head with her tongue. "I want to choose where my husband comes. You're my husband, right?"

He thrust into the rhythm of her hands. "Yes, I'm your husband."

"Is my husband happy?"

"As hell."

She wrapped her lips around his head and sucked until his breaths went from long and drawn out to rapid and short. Then, right before he told her it was coming, she released him from her mouth.

He came on her lips, dripping down onto her chin and his shaft, all over her hands and fingers. Then, while he caught his breath, she licked them clean.

For a second, she thought he would fall asleep, and as much as she wanted more, it would stoke *her* ego for him to climax himself into a good night's rest.

But this was Lucas.

She should have known better.

He tossed her over his shoulder, energy renewed as though she hadn't sucked it away like ice cream through a straw, and carried her back to the kitchen. There, he lay her on the island countertop, the stone cold against the skin on her back.

That didn't last long.

"See, Rai, we didn't need to keep sex on the table." He spread her legs. "The countertop's just fine."

He dipped his head, at first breathing her in like some sort of hedonistic ritual. All the while, her clit pulsed, and her body grew slick, waiting for the touch of his tongue.

It didn't come.

Instead, he sucked on her inner thigh, kissed his way up her groin, and then dragged his tongue along the dark marks that created artwork on her hips and ass.

"Legs up."

She raised her legs in the air.

He kissed his way down the backs of her legs to the round curve of her bottom, then back up to her ankles before sucking the toes on her left foot into his mouth.

Holy crap.

Had men offered to put her feet in their mouths?

Yes.

Did she ever let them?

Never.

Before this, she'd thought it was weird, but there was something insanely sensual about the heat of Lucas' mouth and the way his tongue teased the

sensitive valleys between each toe. Then he slipped his middle and ring finger inside her, and she could no longer separate the sensations. Everything seemed to speak directly to her clit.

She moaned.

“I want to put every inch of you in my mouth,” he said. “The way you turn me on, Rai, is out of this world.”

He kissed the soles of her feet, wrapped her legs around him, and while pumping his fingers in and out of her body, he bent and sucked on her nipples, pulling them into that same hot mouth.

She gripped his hair and screamed so loud that she half-expected the police to show up, asking for him by name. He sucked hard, covering her areola until her nipples stretched into aching points.

He circled them with his tongue. Trapped them between gentle teeth. Made her so wet that she could hear him finger-fucking her and feel her arousal sliding down the rounded globes of her ass.

Then he kissed the tips of both breasts before kissing and licking his way down the middle of her body.

He'd primed her, but he didn't prepare her.

So, when he parted her lips with his thumbs, she moaned. When his tongue touched her clit, she bucked. When he pressed her against her inner thighs, keeping her legs spread for him, she surrendered as he licked her into a gasping, begging mess.

“Lucas.” She fisted his hair. “Yes, baby.”

She tried to close her legs.

Grunting, he forced them back apart.

Like the platter he'd turned her into, she offered more of herself, grinding against his face, wantonly dragging her clit along his tongue.

“Lucas, I'm coming.”

Immediately, she regretted opening her mouth. He stopped, and the need to climax pulled at her until she could barely see straight.

“I want you to come on my dick,” he said.

If it had been a request, she, apparently, took too long to answer. Rather than enter her, he grabbed her hips, tossed her legs over his shoulders, and pulled her onto his length, so thick and firm that it stretched her walls. A moan clawed its way up from her chest, her body needing somewhere to release the jolt of pleasure.

“Come on my dick.” He thrust, teasing the swollen, tender nubbin

between her legs with his thumb. “Come all over your husband’s dick, sweetheart.”

He went deep.

Deep.

A knot of heat traveled from somewhere inside her. On the way, it picked up bliss and ecstasy like hitchhikers on the orgasm highway.

“I feel it,” she whispered.

He didn’t change his pace, didn’t speed up or slow down, keeping her on the ride that would come to an explosive end.

“Raina, I want you to come hard for your husband.”

She caressed her breasts, squeezed her nipples.

“Make a mess all over me, sweetheart.”

Then he circled, stroked, and pulled on her clit until she came with a violent thrash of her body, seeking a grip on the edge of the island to keep herself from flying through the ceiling.

It felt never-ending, pleasure taking and giving, exploding inside her, her limbs trembling and her muscles squeezing his still-stiff erection at the same time.

As usual, he didn’t give her time to catch her breath. She knew he loved how it felt when she came and he was inside her, knew how difficult it was for him to stay still while her body milked him.

“That’s my girl.” He bent and licked her lips. “See? I knew you could do it.”

“Lucas, you’re incredible.”

“I know.”

She laughed, cradled both sides of his face, and kissed him. “I missed you, baby.” She kissed his bottom lip. “I missed you so much.”

“So much that you were going to leave me hanging until Wednesday?” He kissed the rounded tip of her nose. “I wouldn’t have survived, Mrs. Saraci.”

“You missed me?”

“I miss you any time I’m not with you.”

She thrust her tongue into his mouth, and his immediately sought hers in response.

“Come for me, Lucas. Let me show you how much of a good girl I am.”

“You think you can take it all?”

She licked his cheek. “Yes.”

“Fuck, Mrs. Saraci.” His breaths grew harsh. “You want it?”

“I want it.”

“Come take it.”

He pulled out.

Seconds after she sucked him into her mouth, he came on the back of her tongue, pulsing and throbbing against her lips, and she didn't release him until she'd sucked him empty.

“Mrs. Saraci,” he said, abs muscles clenching with each tired breath, “you're going to work tonight.”

He picked her up, walked them back to the bedroom, and lay her on the mattress. Once they'd caught their second wind, he left the room and returned with a bottle of clear, silky liquid.

Taking a deep breath, she rolled onto her stomach and climbed onto all fours while he poured lube oil all over her lower half.

* * *

LILAH

Just try it.

RAINA E. SARACI

Why?

LILAH

Trust me.

Tell me what happens.

Raina put away the bottle of cleaning solution, turned off the stove, and removed the saucepan of oatmeal from the burner. It was the only thing she had as far as food in the house, and if she'd worked up an appetite, she knew

Lucas had to be ravenous.

LILAH

Are you doing it?

Just do it!

Then report back.

RAINA E. SARACI

He's in the shower. When he gets out, I'll do it and report back.

LILAH

Good, Good.

The bathroom door opened and closed.

She pressed play on her phone and added apples, spices, and walnuts to Lucas' oatmeal. As the song played, she laughed to herself.

Delilah and her antics.

RAINA E. SARACI

It's playing.

LILAH

Is he there yet?

Lucas' footsteps sounded in the hall.

RAINA E. SARACI

He's coming now.

He wrapped his arms around her from behind, kissed her cheek, and embraced her with a sigh. His T-shirt and shorts smelled like laundry detergent, and she'd planned to steal a pair, but she sufficed with a robe for the moment as she had more naked things on the docket for them after breakfast.

"Good morning, Mrs. Saraci."

"Good morning." She smiled, eyes closed. "You love calling me that, don't you?"

"You have no idea." He kissed the back of her neck, her nape, her jaw, her ear. "How'd you sleep?"

"I didn't."

"Really? Why not?"

"I think they're doing construction in the neighborhood. There was a lot of...drilling last night."

He laughed, took her chin, and claimed her lips with a kiss that vibrated to the crevice between her thighs. Then, after swatting her on the butt, he continued to the coffee machine, and she watched him from the corner of her eye.

"Dark or light roast?" he asked, searching an upper cabinet.

She fetched spoons from a drawer. "Medium roast, half-caffeine."

RAINA E. SARACI

Nothing's happening.

The song changed.

His head bobbed.

RAINA E. SARACI

Wait. Wait, something's happening.

“Milk, babe?”

She nodded. “Yes.”

He poured sweetened condensed coconut milk into her mug, and she studied him in his zone, stirring her coffee and taking a sip before adding a touch more milk. He didn't notice her watching him until he handed her the mug.

He smiled. “What?”

“Nothing,” she lied.

“I know Delilah put you up to this because I told her what kind of music I listen to.”

“You know this song?”

“Yep.”

“Prove it.”

Had it been a bet, she would have known she'd lost the minute his head cocked to the side and his brow rose to the heavens.

“It was a clear black night, a clear white moon, Warren G was on the streets, tryin' to consume, some skirts for the eve, so I can get some funk, rollin' in my ride, chillin' all alone...”

Suddenly possessed by the spirit of her younger sister, she covered her mouth and squeal-laughed. Burst out giggling. She was always accused of being the dramatic one, and she *was* dramatic as hell, but Delilah had the more decibel-level emotional responses.

Grinning wide, she took a sip from her mug. “I won't lie. That was sexy.”

“Warren G and Nate Dogg is a classic.” He started on his coffee. “Out of curiosity, what does my being Turkish mean to you?”

“When you said you grew up Muslim, I figured that maybe you were banned from listening to hip-hop,” she said. “My mother loves eighties and nineties music, from pop to R&B to hip-hop, but she wasn't exposed to it until she moved here.”

She took their mugs while he carried the bowls of oatmeal to the dining table. He pulled out her chair and waited until she was situated before taking his seat.

“It’s the same with me, but I grew up in *Baltimore*,” he said. “My parents could have tried to block what I was exposed to, but they weren’t with me at school. I was ten when we moved here, and at ten, your peer influence far outweighs your parents’ influence.”

“So no metal or grunge music?”

He grimaced. “Not for me, no.”

“Fall Out Boy?”

“Yes.”

“Foo Fighters?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“How about Jay-Z?”

“Outkast, Dr. Dre, Snoop, Mos Def, and J. Cole, to name a few.” He stirred his oatmeal, eyes on her. “Why does that surprise you? I know you know who the top hip-hop consumers in this country are, and I’m still darker than a good portion of that demographic.”

She nodded. “I do, but before I got to know you, you seemed more buttoned-up. Like you listen to Debussy and Vivaldi and hiss at anyone who dared to play Drake in your presence.”

A laugh had him nearly choking on his spoon. “I pray I become that crotchety in my old age. You’ll hiss with me?”

“I’ll even add a side-eye and a couple of whippersnappers.”

“Good thing we have a porch. Something to tell the neighborhood kids to get off of.” He jabbed an imaginary cane and altered his voice by roughly fifty years. “*Hey! Hey! Get off my porch with ya’ doggone newfangled Devil music!*”

She added, “Then, as faint as a raindrop, one will hear the lyrical notes of a ‘concerto’ about licking a ‘pussy’ and a ‘crack’ playing in the background through our vintage Bluetooth speaker.”

He snorted. “Of course. It’s our anniversary. It’s a special occasion.”

“Gotta bring out the classics.”

Eyes locked with hers, he devoured spoonfuls of oatmeal, much like he’d devoured her for the last several hours, and she realized he’d been smiling since they woke up that morning.

So had she.

“But back to what you were saying,” she redirected. “About you and your musical interests.”

“I was just going to add that I’ve always believed that there are nuances between being a U.S. citizen and an American,” he said. “I think being a U.S. citizen is tied to residence. Being American is tied to identity.”

“And it’s different in Turkey?”

“From what I can remember. See, in Turkey, the culture has Eastern European, Caucasian, Middle Eastern, Central Asian, and Mediterranean influences. Your neighbor could share your culture but look nothing like you. Here, it’s sort of in reverse. This country is young, massive, and less ethnically homogenous, so no distinct shared culture exists. When people see me, the first thing they try to do is put me in a box—Middle Eastern? Greek? Armenian? Once they’ve got me somewhere, they make inferences about my taste in music, clothing,” he scanned her, licking his lips, “and even the kind of women I’m attracted to, my input not necessary.”

“I did that to you.” She pointed her spoon at him. “I thought you approached me because you wanted a ride on the Chocolate Express.”

“Is it weird for me to be attracted to you?”

“It’s not unusual that you find me attractive, but the fact that you pursued me the way you did triggers the need to put my guard up. You *could* be serious, or you could be looking to experiment, like a certain male model I know.”

His brows dipped. “Who?”

“There’s a model who might have expressed an interest in sticking his ‘cock’ in my...ahem...ass.”

“Who?”

“Doesn’t matter.”

“Like hell, it doesn’t. You’re my wife.”

“He’s harmless. It’s how the industry is. You have to build up a thick skin. I’ve had all sorts of people come on to me. Once, I did a shoot with another model from the agency who used to represent me before Estelle went independent. We shared a hotel room. I woke up to her...fingers.”

He set down his spoon. “*What?*”

“I stopped her before she got anywhere. She was drunk, and she apologized the next day.” She’d been barely twenty at the time, and it had been all about pleasing her family. Namely, her mother. The last thing she’d wanted was to ruffle feathers. “Nothing happened, and I was fine.”

“Rai, I won’t pretend that I like what you do,” he said. “I respect the more artistic forms of it, but when you talk about modeling, it’s always in a very matter-of-fact way. When you talk about science, medicine, and research, it’s with passion and curiosity. You’re passionate about the things you love.”

She looked down into her empty bowl. One day, he’d learn how passionate she was about him.

“I won’t ask you to quit.”

“But you’re not *not* asking me.”

“I care about you, Raina. I care about you more than I can tell you, and that includes caring about,” he stroked her temple with his thumb, “here. And,” he tapped the left side of her chest, “here. Protecting your mind, your body, your heart, and your soul? Those are important to me.”

She swallowed.

“You’re not happy.” He took her hand. “Look, I have experience living a lie. My past? All of it’s bullshit. All the articles, the podcasts, the interviews? Lies.”

“So what’s the truth?” she asked, raising her head.

“The truth is, without that lie in my back pocket, a woman like you would have intimidated me.”

“Despite your ego?”

He kissed the back of her hand. “My ego is no match for you. Baby, you’re gorgeous. You’re intelligent. You’re accomplished. Your entire family is accomplished. Your father’s a one-percenter. My mother was a maid up until she died. Any money I gave her, she gave to my siblings. My father was a roofer.”

“Was it a shame thing? Is that why you lied?”

“Oh, one hundred percent, but I wasn’t ashamed of being Muslim, specifically. I was ashamed of being ‘different.’ Of bringing food from home that smelled like spices I never smelled in our lunch cafeteria. Other kids had sandwiches, but not Lucas. Lucas had dumplings stuffed with lamb and seasoned rice wrapped in grape leaves.”

“I would have been your friend,” she said.

“You would have eaten my grape leaves?”

“And your dumplings.”

He stroked her knuckles, the smile on his face going from faint to bold but never entirely disappearing.

“Food was only one part of it. People made fun of my accent, but it didn’t

bother me until they made fun of my mother's. Or her hijab. And because I understood English better than she did, I knew when people were talking about us. I'd feel like she was being taken advantage of since she'd still be nice to them just because she didn't understand they were poking fun at her."

"So rather than embrace your culture..."

"It felt safer to hide it," he finished. "Then my siblings Americanized pretty quickly, even my sister, Marianne, who's only a year younger. Things got worse when my father left, and that's when my best friend, Khalid, entered the picture. He was born in Uganda. The clinic that I run now? His father used to run it. Back then, it was mostly geared toward immigrant families, primarily those from Muslim backgrounds, since the population was so large. Now, it's more socioeconomic based, but the demographics haven't changed much."

"Where's Khalid now?"

"He passed away during our senior year of high school. He had cancer. A fairly curable type. If they'd caught it the first time he went to a doctor about his symptoms, he would have had roughly a ninety-five percent chance of survival. But by the time he met a doctor who would listen..."

"I'm sorry, Lucas."

He planted another kiss against the back of her hand. "We were supposed to marry each other's sister and start a biotech firm."

"You dated his sister?" she asked.

"From sophomore to senior year, but she lost her twin brother, and I lost my best friend. Nothing would have kept us together. We officially ended things right before graduation, but we'd already been pulling apart by then. She went on to Rice University. High school was like playing catch-up for me, grades-wise, so I was shocked I even got into the University of Maryland. I figured they had some kind of foreign kid quota."

She squeezed his hand. "Lucas, you're brilliant. You know that, right?"

"Raina, I *struggled*."

"That doesn't negate your brilliance." She pushed aside her empty bowl. "So, how'd you become 'Lucas Saraci' then? The brand, I guess, that encompasses the man."

"My mother's faith was strong, and even she toned it down for a while after 2001. By then, I was already pulling away from religion, but 2001 gave me more of a push to...start over, in a sense. Soon, my surroundings changed. The people around me changed. Somehow, I went from Middle

Eastern-ish to Mediterranean, and being Mediterranean was like a protective film. It came with privilege. From there, my mother went from housekeeper to professor. My father went from roofer to businessman.”

“The façade kept you safe.”

“Shamefully.”

“There’s nothing wrong with safety, Lucas.”

“Oh, it gets worse.” He released her hand and spun his coffee mug. “Emmaline. I saw her as a...status symbol. Pale skin. Prestigious family. Medical background. The problem was, Emmaline only knew the lie of Lucas Saraci, so she was very vocal about what she thought of certain people.”

“And you never corrected her.”

He shook his head. “No. I thought I needed her. I thought that, if I married her, I’d finally feel...accepted. My entire life had been a lot of looking over my shoulder, hoping no one figured out who I really was. I figured that, with Emmaline, I could build on that fake life until it felt real. But it got worse. I had to pretend out there,” he motioned to a window, “*and* at home. I tried to convince myself that I wasn’t as bad as she was as long as I never chimed in. Then, one day, when we were out, we spotted Osman.”

“Ozzie from the clinic?”

He sighed, his shoulders rising and falling. “Yeah. He noticed me, and he was having chest pains, so he came over. Emmaline saw him first, and with how she talked to him, I turned around expecting to see a rabid raccoon or fox, but it was Ozzie. And, only days before this, Raina, I told him he could come to me if he needed anything. So he did...and I walked away. Then, on the way home, she kept talking about it. Talking about how she’s ‘not free healthcare.’ How skills like mine and hers would be wasted on someone like Ozzie.”

“That’s the woman you lived with?” she asked.

“Yeah.”

“I’m sure it probably only made it worse that she was talking about your father.”

His head jerked back.

“It’s the eyes, Lucas.” She circled her face. “They’re a favorite trait of mine on you, so the minute I spotted Ozzie, I knew.”

“I don’t hate him. I used to until I learned that he was sick, not a selfish bastard.” The corner of his mouth turned up in a smile that lasted less than a second. “Ozzie has trauma. He’s never shared what he’s gone through, but I

can tell it's complex and deep-seated, which leads him to dissociate. He walked away from our family when I was thirteen, but it was never another woman or anything like that. He just wandered off. At first, he'd leave for weeks. Then months. Eventually, my mother put him out, and to deal with it, he turned to alcohol. We stopped seeing him after that, and I didn't see him from age fifteen to until he showed up at the clinic when I was thirty-five."

"Does he know you're his son?"

"Not always. I've been seeing signs of alcohol-related dementia for a while now. When he does remember me, he's always excited to learn about my life. Calls me 'son' or Lucas or *babacığım*, *ba-ba-jih-ihm*, which means 'my dear father.' In Turkish, it's what a father would call his child." He yanked her from her chair onto his lap and kissed her chin. "Thank you for listening to me ramble."

"I enjoy learning about you."

"I really missed you."

"I missed you too."

She felt him smile against her skin.

"Does our relationship feel strained?" she asked. "Like how it was with Emmaline."

"Not at all." He trailed kisses down to her neck and then traced her neck with the tip of his nose. "I think Adam might have knifed me if I didn't find you. This man had to hear me talk about you, every day, for months before Vegas."

"What kinds of things did you say about me?"

"How I wanted to choke you."

"Mmm, sexy."

"Bathe you in hot oil."

"I'm so turned on."

He laughed. "I couldn't understand my attraction to you. You called me a vampire and basically told me to get the hell away from you. But the entire time you were chewing me out, I was rearranging dinner reservations in my head. With you, Rai, everything feels right. You tell me how you feel. You tell me when I'm wrong. You're your own person. And you're okay with me knowing Warren G."

"Emmaline would've clutched her pearls?"

"I don't care anymore." He locked his fingers at the base of her spine. "You didn't have to know who I was to treat me like shit, and I appreciated

that.”

She burst out laughing. “Oh, so I’m an equal opportunity offender?”

“Your disdain has no prejudice, and I needed a blow to my pride.”

“Now, the real question is,” she pushed her fingers through his hair, “do you know any Journey?”

“Of course.”

“Panic! at the Disco?”

“Want me to sing something for you?”

“No. I’ve heard you in the shower. I’m good.”

“*Oh, well imagine, as I’m pacing the pews in a church corridor...*”

Still bubbling with laughter, she wrapped her arms around him and set her head on his shoulder. “How long are you here for?”

“Until Wednesday. I cleared my schedule. I’m,” he faked a cough, “sick.”

“Then what do you want to do today?”

“Make love to you.”

“What else?”

“We could have sex.”

“And after that?”

“We might have some time left to fuck.”

Her phone lit up on the kitchen island, and she retrieved it before returning to her seat on his thighs. As he busied himself by licking and sucking at the hollow of her throat, she accepted the call.

“Hi, Daddy. What’s up? Everything okay?”

“Hi, sweetheart. Your mother told me you’re in North Carolina?”

Lucas eased her back, pulled aside her robe, and proceeded to suck on her nipple like he wasn’t aware that she couldn’t have a coherent conversation with her breast in his mouth.

“Yeah, for a...for a bit,” she answered. “I’m, um, headed back...back up to Maryland on Wednesday. I’m here for...for...you know, um, research stuff.”

“I know Lilah’s happy you’re there so long. Are you home?”

“Yes, I’m home.”

“So you don’t hear me pressing your doorbell?”

“Pressing my...” She froze. “You’re...you’re outside?”

He chuckled. “Yes, Rai-Rai. I missed you. I wanted to surprise you and stop by. Your mother and I don’t get many chances to see you these days.”

“I just got out of the shower. Can you give me a second to get dressed?”

“Of course. Hurry, though. It’s chilly.”

She hung up.

Lucas moved to the other breast.

“Lucas, please...”

He trapped her nipple between his teeth. “What’s wrong? You want to come already? It’s not time for you to come yet.”

“It’s my father.”

“What about your father?”

“He’s outside.”

“He’s outside?” He stopped. “He’s...*outside*?”

“Didn’t you hear me on the phone?”

“Other than your little gasps and moans, I don’t hear much when your breasts are in my mouth.” He wiggled his ring and middle finger. “And when you’re riding my fingers.”

“When did those get there?”

“Long enough for you to ride them.”

“Please don’t get upset, but can you stay in the bedroom while he’s here?”

He stood, picked her up, and headed for the bedroom. “I don’t mind. Why would that make me upset? You’re obviously not ashamed of me. I’m handsome, rich, and successful.”

“That ego of yours will never die.”

And she’d found out, firsthand, just how big it could get when stoked enough.

“I’m not scared of my father,” she clarified. “I’m thirty. I just don’t want my family to know I got married, and I’m deciding to stay married, and I didn’t include them in any of it.”

“I know. I understand.”

He set her down in the bedroom, and she quickly got dressed. Then, after a few placating kisses, which he reassured her she didn’t need to give him but he would accept them graciously, she ran to the front door to let her father in.

“My little Rain-bow!” Orylin Sr. gave her a tight hug, rocking her with a laugh. “I’ve missed you, sweetheart.”

“I missed you too, Daddy.”

They went to the living room.

She noticed him glance at the dining area, and she closed her eyes, cursing under her breath. There were two bowls on the table. Two bowls and

two mugs, all of them empty.

“Busy?” he asked, taking a seat.

She remained standing. “Not really.”

“Huh. How old are you now, Raina?”

“If you don’t know, I can’t tell you.”

He laughed. “I’m a smart man, but sometimes, I call Junior, Delilah, and Delilah, Raina. Then I’ll call you Junior. I don’t know what I’d do if me and your mother had more.”

“Are you thinking about more?” she teased.

He barked a laugh. “Even if it was possible, I couldn’t imagine my two youngest being in elementary and medical school at the same time. Lord, no. Then, after walking in on my *baby girl* holding a pregnancy test...”

He shuddered.

It was how the family learned Delilah and Miguel were seeing each other. They “surprised” her in Baltimore and walked in on her sitting on her bed holding a pregnancy test. Up until then, her poor parents had assumed Delilah was a virgin. However, she’d learned that her sister had been getting her *inner ho* awakened by Miguel—for a while.

A noise sounded from the bedroom, and her father glanced at the hallway.

“What was that?”

“Sounded like my body wash fell in the shower or something, but I’m glad you stopped by,” she quickly added. “I need to talk to you about something, and feel free to tell me that I need to go through the proper channels—”

“How much?”

She paused. “How’d you know?”

“You never ask me for money, Rai-Rai. Not since high school, and that was for yearbooks and class rings and prom dresses. This house,” he motioned around, “was all you. Since you turned eighteen, except for the car O.B. bought you, as a gift, mind you, you’ve managed on your own. You’ve always done well taking care of yourself, but you’re my daughter. You’re allowed to benefit from my success.”

“It’s not for me, per se,” she said. “I want to apply for a grant for our institute.”

Something else fell.

A hushed curse followed, and a half-smile appeared on her father’s face.

“Why a grant? Our foundation could fund your research. My connections

could also get you additional contributions. Buffett's donated billions to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and that's Warren Buffett. You're my flesh and blood."

"But what if we're not solely tech-based? We could still qualify?"

"The goal of our foundation is the intersection of science, medicine, technology, and evidence-based practices to foster initiatives that improve individual and population health. Can you tell me that your work *doesn't* encompass that? I've read your papers."

She gasped. "You have?"

"Raina, I follow everything you kids do, including my two unofficially adopted boys," he said. "I go to all of O.B. and Miguel's games. I sit on the board of a couple of their foundations, and I've volunteered with them overseas. I've read all of Carson's books, and Delilah and I discuss technology and immunology. I love you. All of you. Why wouldn't I be supportive?"

He'd been supportive their entire lives. Her mother, the nurturer, often got more credit, but her father was always there. If he wasn't in step with them, he was never too far ahead or behind.

"Give me one second. I'll be right back."

She went to the bedroom, took Lucas by the hand, and dragged him to the front room.

"Daddy, this is Lucas. Lucas, this is my father, Orylin B. Daniels Sr., the president and co-founder of The O.B. Sinclair Corporation."

Lucas remained frozen in place.

She nudged his side.

"Uh," he extended a hand, "it's nice to meet you, sir. I'm Lucas."

They shook.

"Lucas Saraci, right?" The smile on her father's face slowly grew. "You're the doctor. The one who Delilah works with. We met earlier this year."

"Yes, sir. At the football game. The Major Bowl." Lucas frowned. "That's not right. No, I mean the...Colossal Bowl?"

"It's okay, son. I know what you mean." Her father's gaze shifted to her. "So, is he why my phone keeps asking me to change your name to Raina E. Saraci?"

Shit.

She forgot to fix that.

“So,” her father pointed to them, “are you two—”

“Dating?” Lucas asked. “Um...yes, sir. We’re dating.”

She shook her head. “Lucas, we might as well be totally honest. My dear father, Lucas and I are—”

“Living together,” Lucas cut in again. “In Baltimore.”

“So, this is the real reason you’ve been up there this long?” Orylin Sr. asked. “I knew it couldn’t have been only Delilah. The minute Miguel’s in town, babygirl doesn’t remember us.”

“Lilah and I still see each other,” she insisted. Primarily when Miguel wasn’t in town. “And yes, he’s the reason.” She stroked her ring finger with her thumb, touched metal, and stopped. “We’ve been...together for a little while now, but we met last year.”

“I know the story. Lilah told me all about Greece.” Her father pointed a thumb behind him. “So, Lucas, my daughter had you hiding in the bedroom to avoid me?”

Lucas shook his head. “Not rea—”

“I know my daughter. And, for the record, Rai-Rai, not only did I know someone was here from the two bowls, I knew it was him. After we met him at the game, I told your mother that you two might end up married one day. Give it time.”

Lucas laughed in short, uneven bursts.

Raina scratched at her neck.

“Well, sit. Both of you.” Orylin Sr. gestured to the sofa. “Rai-Rai, let’s talk about your research, and Lucas, Delilah’s been telling me about your vision for the clinic. How can I help?”

An hour and sixty-four ounces of sweat later, they walked her father to the door. He told her that he wanted to learn more about the institute’s research and visit the clinic, and she knew he only suggested it to appease her concerns; they would both receive the funding they needed.

Yet, she appreciated it.

“Are you joining us for the holidays, Lucas? I remember Lilah telling us you’re Turkish? Do you celebrate?”

“My family and I started celebrating when we moved here,” Lucas explained. “Unofficially. Honestly, Turkish people will take any occasion to get together and eat good food.”

Orylin Sr. laughed. “Sounds like Black folk.”

“Daddy?” Raina called. Her brain wasn’t working correctly. There was no

other way to explain why the words, “Lucas and I would like to host this year in Baltimore,” left her wicked mouth.

“Will there be a turkey, at least?” her father asked. “An actual turkey, not a Satan one.”

“That’s *seitán*, and there’ll be something for everyone,” she promised. “Lucas eats meat, and he’s an excellent cook.”

“All right, then. Sounds good. And make sure you two stop by the house before you head back. Nice seeing you again, Lucas.”

Lucas went for a handshake, but her father pulled him in for a hug. Then, he hugged her and planted a loud kiss on her cheek. Afterward, they watched him go, and once his car was out of sight, she turned to Lucas.

“My god, Saraci.”

“It’s culturally ingrained in me,” he argued. “When it comes to older folks, especially my *wife*’s parents, I’m hardwired to fall apart. It’s a respect thing. Holy shit. I wasn’t expecting to be formally introduced. I would’ve changed out of the shorts and T-shirt at least.”

“I realized I didn’t want to hide you,” she said. “I’m proud of my relationship with you.”

They headed inside.

“So I guess we’re hosting?” he asked. “Do you mind if I invite my family?”

She took his hands and walked backward to the bedroom, pulling him along. “Not at all, baby. Of course, I want your family there.”

“It might not be all of them, but I’ll see what I can do. We haven’t gotten together in a while. It’ll be nice.”

“It will. We’ll cook Turkish, southern African American, Senegalese, and Vegetarian dishes. If we get Miguel to help, we’ll add some Dominican flavor.” She raised his hand, kissed his palm. “But, for now, what do you want to do?”

He looked at his watch. “I don’t think we have time to make love.”

“Or have sex.”

“Guess we’ll just have to fuck.”

She sighed. “I guess.”

They were naked in a flash, and the man felt so good inside her that it didn’t take long to turn into a quivering heap beneath him. However, the bad habit they had yet to break reared its head, their sensibilities clouded in passion.

“I want you to have my baby, Rai.” Lucas groaned, moving inside her and so close to orgasm, she felt him shudder. “Do you want to have my baby?”

“I want to have your baby.” She locked her legs around his waist. “Come inside me, Lucas. Let me have your baby.”

Chapter Twenty-One

Lucas lifted a serving dish over Raina's head while she set *meze* platters, appetizer and side dish platters, on the table. The dinner now consisted of members of the immediate and extended Daniels family; two of his sisters, Marianne and Brittany, and his brother Jonathan; Marianne's daughters; and Delilah had also invited her pitiful friend, Oliver Samson because he was unable to make it home for the holidays.

Roughly twenty people would be dining with them. To prepare, they hired a moving crew to clear out the living room furniture as the kitchen wasn't large enough to handle the "small restaurant's worth" number of guests.

Raina popped a red lentil patty into her mouth, and in addition to making sure everything went as smoothly as possible, he paid attention to what she ate.

The stress of her decision to host hit her hard on Sunday, and it hadn't let up all week. She'd shared that one of her warning signs that she might need help was a sudden, prolonged loss of appetite, so they ate as many meals together as they feasibly could.

"Is the macaroni and cheese done yet?" she asked.

"All done," Delilah yelled from the kitchen. "Guel, how's the rice?"

"That's done, too," Miguel said. "Hopefully, it tastes as good as my mother's. Now, the only thing we're waiting on is the desserts. Luc hooked us up with the baklava, Raina threw down on the sweet potato pie..." He chewed. "I picked up *Bizcocho*, and it looks authentic, and Pops said he and Mrs. Daniels are bringing a second cake."

Delilah looped her arms through one of his. "Guel, you've been eating

since we got here. What are you eating now?”

“You need to try this, Lilah. I mixed some leftover mac and cheese with...what’s this called again, Luc?”

Lucas took a second count of the number of chairs. “*Ezme*. It’s spicy tomato salad.”

“So, Turkish salsa, basically,” Miguel said. “Shit is good. We need to do this again but as a fusion. *Ezme* mac and cheese. *Arroz blanco* with *dibi*. You know some Dominican rice with grilled lamb would be ah-fucking-mazing.”

Delilah laughed.

Lucas finished arranging the chairs around the extra-long connected rectangular tables and then scanned the room to see if anything else needed their attention. Delilah and Miguel had been there since last night, and they’d told all their guests they were starting earlier than they truly were in hopes of having everyone show up on time, as his family was notorious for being late.

Everyone was either staying at a nearby hotel, B&B, or at Miguel and Delilah’s, and he’d stopped Raina just shy of offering anyone else rooms at the house. There was no way she would have been able to handle it.

“Where’s Raina?” he asked.

She appeared from upstairs, munching on a *fataya*, which he learned was a beef empanada, except she’d switched out the beef for a seasoned ground mushroom and walnuts mixture.

“Babe,” he met her at the bottom of the steps, “are you okay?”

“Mm-hmm.” She chewed, nodding. “I’m all right. I just changed out of the greasy clothes.”

“If you need me, tell me.”

“Lucas, you cooked sixty percent of everything today and still helped get the house set up. I don’t have to tell you when I need you. You seem to know.”

He kissed the twisted strands of her hair. “I’ll go change. Oliver texted Delilah that he was on his way. I forgot that he might be on time.”

She laughed. “I’ll let him in. Be nice.”

“Are you talking to me or yourself?” he asked.

“Mostly myself.”

The guests slowly funneled in.

With each new arrival, the chatter steadily rose, along with the number of shoes near the front door, but they over-purchased guest slippers to have enough to go around.

When Marianne, Brittany, and Jonathan showed up, despite not seeing his siblings in over a year, there was nothing awkward about their greeting. And he realized how important that year was when he saw how much his nieces had grown and changed. His oldest niece, Marianne's eight-year-old daughter, Sanem, was nearly Raina's height—although it wasn't a difficult feat to accomplish, being Raina's height.

“Mari, Jay, and Britt-Brat, I want you all to meet my wif—*girlfriend*, Raina,” he introduced, walking them to the kitchen, and he knew he would be making that slip-up all night. “Raina, these are my siblings. How many fights have you gotten in this year, Britt?”

Brittany slapped his arm.

He pulled her into a partial chokehold to keep her in place as he kissed her hair. “It's a valid question, Sugar Ray.”

They exchanged hugs, and like him, Sanem became near-instantly enamored with Raina. It was hard not to with an angel like his wife. He often found himself hard-pressed to believe what Delilah said, that there existed people with brains who thought Raina's complexion detracted from her beauty.

Not to him.

Never to him.

Once everyone had arrived, they sat down to eat, and he did his best to keep his hands off Raina. Something about the atmosphere of family and good food made him want to touch her, kiss her, and be near her—constantly. It might have been the same for her because he rarely went more than a few minutes without her fingers brushing some part of his body.

They wore their rings, but not on their ring fingers, and it was a bit of a turn-on, that secret hidden in plain sight. Every once in a while, he sought out her hand and played with it, just to remind himself it was there.

Everyone's diet was considered, including his brother, who didn't eat pork, as Jay was the only one of the five who still practiced the Islamic faith. Raina's family, as warm and loving and inviting as they were, set the tone for the evening, especially her brother, who was naturally funny and charismatic.

Then, although it was painfully apparent that Delilah's friend, Oliver, was still interested in her, his long gazes and flirtatious smiles, all when Oliver *thought* no one was looking, didn't alter the mood.

But one person did.

Raina's Aunt Steffie.

“I don’t mean any disrespect, Lilah,” Stephanie began. “I just still don’t understand this. Did your mama teach you some of that African hoodoo-oodoo? Because you and Miguel do not make sense, niece.”

Mrs. Daniels whispered something to her husband, who was preoccupied with staring at Stephanie and shredding turkey with his teeth.

Stephanie turned her focus to Raina, and Lucas sat up straighter in his seat. Going after Delilah would get her injured. Going after Raina would get her killed.

“You’re looking gorgeous as ever, Raina,” Stephanie said. “Lord have mercy. I have never seen a more beautiful child. How long do you spend in the mirror? Can you imagine if God had given me your looks with my complexion?”

“God had no hand in creating you,” Raina deadpanned, chewing on a bread roll. “He gave your parts to the drunkest angel in heaven and said, ‘Do whatever.’”

Jay choked on a laugh.

Marianne covered a smile.

Stephanie chuckled. “Girl, you are too funny, but I see that you helped your sister. Lilah’s not pretty enough for Miguel, but she did get pretty. And I see that she grew some titties.”

“Mommy, what’s a ‘titties’?” Sanem asked.

Marianne whispered something in her ear and then kissed her cheek. Raina skewered her aunt with a look, and Lucas caught O.B.’s eye, silently asking him who the hell had invited this woman to dinner. O.B. silently responded that he had “fucking” no idea; the ire in O.B.’s eyes was so plain, he heard the curse.

Raina had made comments about her aunt in passing in the time since they moved in together, and she always used one word to describe her “Aunt Steffie.”

Messy.

Yet, her aunt continued to be invited to family functions, and Raina had shared that she had a feeling it had to do with her father feeling guilty about leaving his youngest stepsister out of events. However, someone would have to accept that Stephanie was more toxic than black mold at some point.

“Guel, O.B., are you glad to have today off?” Lucas asked, hoping to change the subject.

Miguel had a mouthful of food, so O.B. answered.

“Yes, yes, yes. I can’t tell you how nice it is to be able to sit down with family and relax my bones.”

Sanem’s eyes lit up. “You play a sport, O.B.?”

O.B. smiled. “Yes, ma’am. Me and Miguel play football. We’re retiring soon, though.”

“You don’t like it anymore?”

“We do, but we like our families even better.” O.B. scooped salad greens and tomatoes onto his plate. “What about you, Sanem? Your mom told me you’re the best goalie in your soccer league.”

Sanem’s face flushed. “Not even.”

“How many positions do you play?”

“Two. Goalie and forward.”

“How about this? I’ll come to one of your games, and you can come to one of mine. Then, at the end, you can give me pointers.”

Sanem giggled. “*Me* give *you* pointers? Um...okay? Oh, can J.R. come too? He’s so adorable.”

O.B. nodded. “Of course.”

“And I think Eli thinks you two are best friends, Uncle Lucas,” Sanem added. “Do you and Aunt Raina want any babies?”

The whole table turned their way.

Raina stuffed her cheeks with more bread while Lucas scratched the back of his head. Eli *had* taken to him to the point that he’d taken him and Marianne’s younger daughter, two-year-old Lale, for a short walk.

They found an interesting leaf.

“Do you?” Mrs. Daniels asked.

Thankfully, Brittany came to their rescue.

“We’ll get back to them in a minute, but there are more pressing matters at hand,” she said. “Carson, when’s the next book coming out? Let me tell you, I devoured *Ruse de Guerre*, and I haven’t talked to a single person who saw that twist at the end. Please tell me Alexandre’s getting a story. We literally don’t know what happened to him after Frankie double-crossed the Resistance, but he was too badass to be killed.”

Carson laughed. “Unofficially? That’s the next book in the series. It’s already with the publisher.”

“Yes.” Brittany tapped her fingers together. “Now, I do have a question about—”

“Where are you from, again?” Stephanie cut in.

The table collectively groaned.

Lucas turned to find Stephanie's eyes on him and took a swig of the sweet hibiscus drink Raina's parents brought.

"Turkey," he said.

"And where is that again?"

"It borders Bulgaria, Greece, Azerbaijan, Syria, Iraq, Iran, Armenia, and Georgia."

O.B.'s wife, Samantha, set down her fork. "Wow. Eight countries? Do you notice the influence of them all? Do the cultural influences compete?"

Lucas nodded. "Yes, we do notice the influences in different ways, but it all seems to mesh perfectly. Of course, I might be biased."

"How often do you visit?" Tamika, Carson's wife, asked.

"When I can. We still have family there."

Stephanie cut in again. "That wasn't my question. Are you white?"

Lucas sighed. "I'm Turkish, Stephanie."

She gestured to Carson. "Carson is white. That little boy who keeps staring at Delilah all lovey-dovey? He's white."

Miguel snorted.

Oliver's gaze dropped to his plate.

"Those people," Stephanie pointed, "are your family, right? But your brother looks Arab, your fat sister looks Mexican, and your tomboy-looking sister looks Greek or something. So, what are you?"

"My mom's not fat," Sanem spat. "And my Aunt Brittany looks way better than you. Plus, she's not an evil witch."

"Don't mind her, Sanem," Raina said. "Nothing she says is true. Stephanie has a problem where she can't keep her mouth shut until somebody socks her in it."

"You should sock her, Aunt Raina."

"I should, shouldn't I?"

Lucas stroked Raina's thigh. "Stephanie, why does any of that matter? What do you plan to do with the information? I'm Raina's man. Full stop."

"She won't know what that is," Raina went on. "She hasn't had one of those since 2012. What was his name again, Steffie? The dude that said if the world ended in 2012, he was ready if it meant getting away from you? Chauncey?"

"Nah, it was Chance," O.B. said. "And he didn't want to take one."

The table laughed.

Stephanie, brows wrinkled—as if she wasn't the one who started this shit in the first place—popped a lentil meatball into her mouth. “The problem is, y'all are ignorant,” she said.

Mrs. Daniels set down her utensils. “Oh? We're ignorant? Please explain, Steffie. This, I have to hear.”

“I ask the questions everyone else is too scared to ask.”

“You think everyone wants to know if I'm white?” Lucas asked. “Look around. Nobody here cares where I'm from.”

“Are you Muslim?”

“I grew up of Islamic faith, but I don't practice much of anything now. Is that a crime?”

Stephanie looked from him to Raina. “Are you prepared to cover up your body? To share him with other women? You know they can have multiple wives, right?”

“It is allowed,” Jay said. “But it's not mandatory. And I don't see how that would apply to my brother if he doesn't practice.”

Stephanie popped another meatball into her mouth. “You're not even American. Where you're from, maybe you don't understand that there are cultural differences. Interracial relationships aren't as easy as y'all are out here making them to be.”

Lucas folded his arms, head cocked. “Who said they were easy? And regardless of what I look like, I love Raina for who she is. Everything she is.”

Raina looked his way.

He met her eyes, and a question danced in her irises, but he was too preoccupied with Stephanie to decipher it.

Turning back to Stephanie, he opened his mouth to say more, but fate intervened.

Stephanie coughed, clawing at her throat. Tears sprung in her eyes, and she thumped herself in the chest, eyes pleading and the whites slowly transitioning to pink.

The room went silent.

Then Mr. Daniels sighed. “Help her, son.”

Lucas stood, walked over, and performed the Heimlich, dislodging dry legumes from his wife's messy aunt's throat.

Stephanie slumped forward.

He returned to his chair. “Careful. Those are a little dry. Wouldn't want you to choke.”

Mr. Daniels stood. “Stephanie, I need to talk to you outside.”

Stephanie shook her head.

“Now,” he barked.

They went to the door.

When it opened, a man stood on the doorstep, hand dangling in the air in the middle of getting ready to press the doorbell. Lucas stared at him, but there was no way that was who he thought that was.

Raina kissed his cheek, stood, went to the door, and hooked elbows with the man. “Everyone, this is Osman Saraci. He and I had a little spa day yesterday because he wanted to make sure he looked snazzy when he showed up for dinner.”

Lucas rose onto unsteady feet.

So did Marianne, Jay, and Brittany.

It wasn't the Ozzie that regularly sat before him on an exam table. This version wore a nice shirt and slacks, had gotten a haircut, and was clean-shaven.

This version *looked* like their father.

Knowing Raina, she'd already explained the situation to her family, which was probably why only he and his siblings stood around, stunned and motionless.

Ozzie waved. “Good evening.”

Marianne and Jonathan carefully made their way over before enclosing Ozzie in a hug. Brittany hung back; she was the youngest and was only three when he left, so she didn't have the same “I miss you, Dad,” tugging desperately at her heartstrings the way he, Marianne, and Jonathan did.

Lucas hugged him next, doing a quick assessment on his way over. He and Ozzie saw each other more frequently than his siblings, but tonight felt different. Even if the clean-up was temporary, for one evening, they had their father back.

“You look good, Ozzie,” he said.

Ozzie smoothed his shirt. “I feel good.”

Next, they “introduced” him to Brittany. Brittany shared that she remembered a little about him, snippets and snatches, but Lucas was grateful he didn't spot any latent anger on his least forgiving sibling's face.

Brittany had Ozzie take the seat next to her. Mr. Daniels took Stephanie outside, and all the tension disappeared with Stephanie gone.

Stephanie returned to her hotel.

After dinner, they had dessert—ice cream, pies, cake, and coffee. Then, when everyone could barely keep their eyes open, the guests cleared out in large chunks.

Lucas offered Ozzie a place to stay for the night, but Ozzie told them he was staying at the housing facility the clinic had recommended multiple times. Lucas offered to at least drop him off, but Brittany said she would take him.

A little after one in the morning, he and Raina crawled into bed. Weariness ached down to his bones, but after everything she'd done for him, he mustered up the strength to coax her onto her belly.

Their weariness disappeared.

Her body hugged him, tight and warm—so tight and *so fucking warm*—with each stroke, and she pushed back against him, matching him thrust for thrust.

There was no calling his name, no groaning hers. The sound of her ass slapping his pelvis was the only melody he needed, her pussy so dripping wet that she coated his length.

His wife had a lovely ass.

An incredible, sensational ass.

She'd worn the tiniest panties he'd ever seen in his life to bed, virtually all string, and the string sitting on top of her luscious curves messed with his head.

She gasped.

Then her whole body shook as she fell forward onto her palms, breathing hard, her pussy milking him with gentle tugs. The plan had been to give her a moment to come down from her climax, but falling forward put her ass in the air.

And she was still shaking.

He grabbed her hips and drove into her, reigniting the wet and juicy noises of their lovemaking. Not long after, she began to move again, matching him, and he tossed his head back, sinking his teeth into his bottom lip.

Pull out.

He had to pull out.

But she felt so damn good.

“Where do you want it, baby?” he forced out. “Want me to come all over this beautiful ass?”

She shook her head. “One last time.”

“You want me to come inside you?”

“I want to feel it spilling out of—”

He released, hot and thick, inside her.

Once he was in there, coherent thought went out the window. The primal instinct to come inside her took over, and the pure euphoria of bathing her hot flesh with his release made it increasingly difficult to pull out each subsequent time. It also didn't help that she encouraged him, all breathy and hoarse and moaning.

They collapsed.

“It's hard to think straight when you're inside me,” she said. “If we keep going like this, I'll end up pregnant.”

He kissed her shoulder. “I know. I tell myself to pull out.”

“And then I tell you to come inside me.”

“We're a mess.”

She looked down. “I'm about to be an even bigger mess. You gave me so much, I don't think my body can handle it all.”

Before they realized it, he was on top of her. She'd locked her ankles behind his back, and when he came again, he made an even bigger mess than before.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Lucas walked down the long hallway at the event hall in search of Delilah. This year, the physician's ball was held in the courtyard of the same building that housed the Smithsonian and National Portrait Gallery.

Though frigid outside, the space was warm, and it would be a romantic evening to spend with Raina underneath the stars. At the moment, she was at home, feigning illness and pretending she was too sick to show up, but she'd forgotten that her sister was a blabberer.

Delilah had already let it slip that she would be there tonight as she fully intended to keep her promise, and he looked forward to seeing her walk in.

That weekend, they were flying out to spend the Christmas holiday with her family in North Carolina. Marianne, her daughters, and Brittany would be joining them. It was also when he and Raina would announce that they were, in fact, married and living together.

As far as Raina's retirement, she would be announcing that as well, although she'd officially already retired from the industry. At first, she was worried about how her mother would feel, given her mother's sacrifice. Then she'd realized that, no matter the outcome, she and her mother were both adult enough to get over it eventually.

She wasn't used to making decisions that suited her alone, being the oldest and female, but she was getting used to it. Plus, she had a supportive spouse to curtail her three o'clock in the morning bouts of self-doubt.

A firm feminine voice floated down the corridor, combined with soft, sniffling noises:

"I have the power to get you kicked out of this program. What have you got to say for yourself? This is reprehensible behavior."

Lucas followed the voices and stopped outside the open doorway, out of sight.

“Dr. Rockledge, you’re wrong,” Delilah said.

Emmaline scoffed, and he could picture her, smug with her arms folded, “looking down her nose” at Delilah despite Delilah being the taller one. Delilah had come a long way in terms of her confidence, but her medical school career was important to her. Any threat to her future was enough to break that budding confident exterior.

“I see you,” Emmaline said. “You sit on his desk, and you’re always in his office. It’s disgusting. You even visit him at the hospital, then walk out holding hands.”

“Dr. S and I don’t hold hands.”

“So, my eyes lied to me?”

“You mean when we hooked elbows? I do that with my brother and father.”

“I don’t know your family’s situation. You could have come from a troubled background, wealthy or not.”

Delilah sniffed harder. “Dr. Rockledge, Dr. S and I are close, but we’re not close in the way you’re implying.”

“Implying?” Emmaline snorted. “Maybe I’m not being clear. I’m not implying anything. You and Luke are sleeping together.”

Lucas rounded the corner.

When Emmaline spotted him, her smug expression fell, which wasn’t surprising. Berating a student, she could do, but when it came to facing him, she reverted to that faux innocence he’d seen her use far too many times to count.

Once upon a time, he’d fallen for it, but her crocodile tears would only serve as hydration for his rage if she tried to unleash them tonight.

“What’s going on here?” He tried to comfort Delilah, but she stepped away from him. “Lilah, what’s wrong?”

“Dr. Rockledge was explaining to me that the closeness of our relationship is inappropriate,” she said. “And that the optics of it are enough to get me kicked out of Hopkins.”

He frowned.

This shit still?

During the spring semester, John Nelson had called him into an impromptu meeting because an anonymous source, whom he now believed

he'd identified, had complained that his relationship with Delilah was too casual.

He'd asked John to give him proof of what this person had claimed—data, photos, documentation of favoritism—to which John had chuckled and said that the meeting was a formality. He'd merely wanted to alert him that if he genuinely was sleeping with a student, he needed to have more discretion.

Delilah wasn't the only student he offered additional opportunities in medicine, nor was she the only student he helped. Over time, especially once Raina became involved, their relationship did go from mentor-mentee to him feeling a protective, brotherly instinct over her, especially after the Oliver Samson fiasco.

"Lilah, no one is kicking you out of medical school," he reassured her. "Least of all Emmaline Rockledge."

Delilah turned teary eyes in his direction. "Really?"

"Yeah. You see, Emmaline and I used to be involved, and I think she's retaliating because I married your sister. I think she believes, because we used to be involved, that I won't use my power to bury her professionally."

Emmaline's and Delilah's eyes rounded, both for different reasons. Emmaline had seen no need to verify who he'd married, which was why she currently looked like a fool. On the other hand, Delilah likely had no idea he and Emmaline used to be a thing.

At school, they'd kept things professional, never once sharing a longing gaze or holding hands unless it was behind closed doors, which was laughable. Had it been Raina's office down the hall from his, he would have worn her out in every empty room the building possessed by the end of the first week.

"You can go back to the event," he said. "I'll handle this."

Delilah enclosed him in a tight hug. "Thank you, Luc. I didn't know what to do here. I thought virtually everyone knew Miguel and I were engaged."

So did he.

She talked about Miguel nonstop.

While he rubbed her back, he locked eyes with Emmaline. She'd taken Delilah off to the side for this little pow-wow because she knew, had she done this in public, there would have been too many flapping gums to remind her that she didn't have the power to expel a student. She barely had the power to accuse a student of inappropriate behavior without any semblance of proof.

“I’ll go back out front and wait for Raina,” Delilah said.

He nodded. “Text me when she arrives so I can prepare my surprised face.”

Laughing quietly, she left the room.

The minute she was gone, the temperature went from comfortable to a frozen tundra, and he half expected frost to leave Emmaline’s nostrils with every unsteady exhalation.

He folded his arms over his chest. “Are you proud of yourself, Em? Threatening an innocent student?”

“Luke—”

“Lucas.”

Miguel and Delilah called him Luc, which he was okay with, although there was no difference between the two phonetically. Still, he personally heard the distinction between the *c* and the *ke*.

“*Lucas*,” Emmaline corrected. “Lucas, this is why it would have been helpful if you gave me more information about your marriage. Your relationship with Delilah Daniels is rather intimate. What else was I supposed to think?”

“It’s not about what you were supposed to think,” he spat. “It’s about what was true. You could have asked me. You can tell me how I’m not a good person and only have two things going for me, but you can’t tell me when you’ll accuse one of the best students in our program of sleeping with an instructor.”

“I know you probably think this was jealousy or maliciousness, but this didn’t come from a bad place.”

“Did you ask me if I married Delilah?”

“Would you have told me if you had? You said you weren’t interested in discussing your marriage.”

“I could have told you that there are multiple YouTube videos of Miguel’s proposal to Delilah. I could have said no, I didn’t marry Delilah Daniels, but you didn’t give anyone that opportunity. Instead, you chose to scold her. Is there something about her that bothers you? Is it that she’s still managed to find the ability to be a good person despite coming from a family whose net worth makes yours look like pennies?”

Outside of flared nostrils and a clenching, twitching jaw, she didn’t respond.

“I love what I do, Em. I love the difference I get to make in the world and

in students' lives. I'll never do anything to jeopardize that, and I'll be damned if I let you jeopardize my sister's future over an *assumption*."

Her face fell, and her eyes filled. "I'm sorry, Lucas. Malice wasn't my intention. You just seem so different. It's like I never knew you."

Happy.

He seemed happy.

His students still cowered when he walked by, but ever since he met Raina, none of them, as far as he knew, had thrown up or passed out. A few had even come close to seeing him smile.

"Emmaline, a student could have been kicked out, and I could have lost my position. You could have damaged my reputation. I take my job seriously. Doesn't it bother you that you didn't think twice about possibly destroying someone's livelihood?"

A tear fell onto her cheek, one after the other, and she stared up at him, not bothering to try to brush them away. It was what she did, brought out the tears when she thought they would work in her favor. When she thought they would force him to crumble the way he did in the past, not because they'd affected him but because he'd assumed he needed her.

"Cry," he said.

She gasped and swiped at her eyes.

"Expect a formal complaint on my and Delilah's behalf," he continued. "If I'm feeling merry, I'll toss in a defamation lawsuit. Keep fucking with me and my family, and watch what kind of damage the name Lucas Saraci can do. Learn to act like a professional, or you won't be welcome in a professional environment. This isn't high school. It's the fucking John Hopkins University College of Medicine."

Before he threatened more damage, he returned to the venue's central area, the wide open courtyard lit in soft blues and reds. Seconds away from dragging off his tie and going home, he grabbed a glass of champagne from a passing server's tray. Tonight was too important of a night to bail out, but what he wouldn't do for his wife's arms and legs wrapped around him right about then.

"Saraci!" John Nelson waved, and he imagined chopping off the man's arm from John's shoulder to his wrist. "Come over here. There's someone I want you to meet."

Lucas downed the glass of champagne, grabbed a second, and headed to the small circle of too-large suits stuffed with bombastic personalities. There

was John, a neurosurgeon he'd met a few times named Dr. Weston Mills, and a third face he didn't know, but the man's aura screamed *wealthy benefactor who expected them to bend over if he dangled enough dollar signs the university's way*.

"This is Lucas Saraci," John said, gesturing to him. "Let me tell you, this guy is the brightest spot here at the university. Saraci, this is Rich Engleton of Engleton Enterprises."

They shook hands.

While John spoke, he scanned the room, searching for *his* brightest spot. The most brilliant star in his universe.

"Heard that you married the daughter of a friend of mine, Saraci," Rich said.

He blinked the man into focus. "I'm sorry?"

"Orylin Daniels is a friend. I heard that you married his daughter. We play golf regularly, and he was bragging about you."

Lucas kept his embarrassment and appreciation tucked away. As far as he could recall, the last person who'd bragged about him was his mother. It was also possible that Ozzie did during the times he was most lucid.

"You married Delilah?" Weston Mills asked.

John, chuckling, shook his head. "No, although she's plenty cute enough. He married Delilah's sister, and let me tell you...she is a beauty. If I had been twenty-five years younger, I would have given Saraci here a run for his money."

Lucas, laughing, bent near John's ear and lowered his voice. "Stop while you're ahead, or I will *kill* you."

John, choking, coughed into a fist.

"Do you golf, Saraci?" Rich asked.

As he went to respond, his eyes landed on the most gorgeous creature he was sure anyone in the room had ever seen. She stood with her sister, draped in a red dress that made her look like she was part of the elegant decor. She was so vibrant, he wasn't sure whether it was the dress' fabric or her aura that resulted in her glow.

"Excuse me, gentlemen," he said.

She searched the room, and when their gazes connected, she started for him, but he shook his head. He needed her to stay right where she was; he wanted to go to her.

Their bodies collided.

He wrapped his arms around her, inhaling her scent and lifting her off her feet. Most days, he was amazed that he was here and was free to love her. Considering how they'd met, he'd assumed a life with her would have remained just out of his reach.

Getting the girl wasn't unusual for him, but Raina would have always been worth the effort. She was the one who he would have never dazzled into falling for him. To get the woman of his dreams, he'd had to become something he hadn't been for far too long—the real version of himself.

"Hi, baby." She gave him a squeeze. "I felt a little better, and I didn't want to stand you up on a night this important."

He set her down on her feet.

She sounded nasal, and her eyes looked tired. Flawless makeup covered what he was sure would have been more visible symptoms, but he'd assumed she was being coy when she'd told him she wasn't feeling well.

"Sweetheart," he pressed the back of his hand against her forehead, "you're really not feeling well. Feels like you're running a fever."

"I wasn't when I left the house."

"Lilah, take her h—"

"No, Lucas. I'll stay. Delilah told me this is an important night for you. I assume that means you're getting an award of some sort."

He already had one.

She was every award, gift, surprise, and piece of goodness he would ever need. Had he known she honestly wasn't feeling well, he would have canceled the entire thing and stayed with her, endless mugs of mint and lemon tea at the ready, his mother's cure-all for every ailment.

"Let's go sit, then," he suggested.

He scooped her up into his arms, and she laughed, pressing a kiss against his neck. People watched them, but that was what he wanted. This woman made him happier than happy, and he wanted as many people as possible to know how much. The only aspect of his relationship with Raina he wanted behind closed doors were the aspects that could get them arrested if they were to do them in a public place.

He set her down at their table, which they shared with Adam, Cheryl, Bill, John, two other physicians, and a dour-looking Emmaline.

Raina leaned against him, and he pulled her chair closer, feeling like shit, knowing she was only there for him. Once his segment for the night was over, they would go home.

“You look beautiful, Rai,” he whispered.

She wrapped both of her arms around one of his. “Oh, I know. The look on your face told me I made a good choice with this dress.”

“Everything looks good on you.”

“You included.”

He buried his nose in the sweet-smelling, straightened strands of her hair.

“What are you getting recognized for?” she asked. “Delilah didn’t tell me.”

“Those of us receiving awards don’t know,” he explained. “Our attendance is only requested to make sure we’re here.”

“It’s probably the highest achievement in the room.”

“There’s an award for being your husband?”

She snickered. “Good one. I like that.”

“I’m charming when I want to be.”

The awards ceremony began.

Several presenters went to the front of the room to give speeches or talk about new research being conducted at the hospital as well as noteworthy research outcomes. They talked about department funding and notable grants, including the two received from the O.B. Sinclair Corporation’s foundation. Lucas listened with half of an ear, more concerned about the warm-skinned woman leaning against him.

Adam left the table and went up to the podium, giving him a pat on the shoulder as he walked by. Delilah and several other attendees left their tables to join them.

“We don’t know why he puts up with us here at Hopkins, knowing he could go work in the White House or something,” Adam began with a slight laugh. “The next physician we’re recognizing is a true leader. He’s a patient advocate. He collaborates seamlessly with oncologists, radiologists, and speech therapists to provide comprehensive care for his patients. His presence here alone has brought millions of dollars in funding to the university, and when he’s not saving the world, he’s starting and leading clinical trials to test novel therapies for head and neck diseases.”

Faces started to become familiar, and if he wasn’t mistaken, they appeared to be students of his from prior cohorts.

Raina slid her fingers between his.

Each student said their piece, and with each student who spoke, she held him tighter. He was a dick to his students. From what he understood, they

feared him. However, it appeared fearing him didn't mean hating him.

Finally, Delilah stepped forward, clearing her throat before she spoke. "Dr. S is more than the best instructor I've ever had, hands down. He's my mentor. He's my friend. He's the person who helps me keep my head on straight when I start to question why I made the decision to become a doctor. He's taught me that there's more to medicine than prestige and that, when you have a skill, there's pride in using it to help others because you never know who you might inspire. I'm not a doctor yet, but I know he's already made me a better one. And now," she gestured, "he's my brother-in-law."

Everyone in the room turned to their table.

Raina held up her left hand, and he kissed each of her warm knuckles to a room full of applause. Then she stood, and when he tried to help her, she told him she had "the strength for this part."

One of the servers hurried over and handed her a microphone, and as he stared up at her, in awe, she smiled down at him, bracing herself with one hand on his shoulder.

"Lucas, when Delilah told me that you would be getting this award today, not even a fever would have stopped me from being with you in this moment," she said. "You change lives, Lucas. I know you don't realize it, but you've changed your students' lives...and you've changed mine in so many more ways than I'll ever be able to tell you. I'm proud of you, sweetheart, and I love you. I love you so, so much."

While his throat shrunk, his heart soared. "I love you too," he said.

Delilah continued. "It's my honor to present the Samhita Surgical Pioneer Distinguished Leaders and Innovators Award to my mentor, brother-in-law, and friend, Dr. Lucas Saraci."

The room erupted in applause.

As he rose to his feet, Raina cradled his jaw and whispered, "Congratulations...Pookie."

He searched her eyes, bent, and brushed his lips over hers, not giving a damn if he got her flu. Then he eased back, searched her eyes again, and pressed his lips to hers a second time, until she smiled and broke the kiss and nudged him to go and accept his award.

With great effort, he put one foot in front of the other. When he arrived on the stage, he hugged all the students, but when he came to Delilah, he kissed her hair and squeezed her tight.

"Congratulations, Dr. S," she said.

“Thank you, Lilah.”

He went to the podium but only looked in one direction throughout his speech. Into one pair of eyes. He was literally standing in a room where everyone agreed that he was good at what he did, one of the best, but all he could think about was getting off the stage to kiss Raina again. To take her home, hold her close, and nurse her back to health.

“I’m not a man of many words,” he began.

The room tittered with laughter.

He raised the award. “But thank you for this recognition. When you’re going about your day-to-day life, you’re usually not thinking about the lives you touch. As a physician, you know you’re making a difference, but for many of us, after a while, it becomes more about how well your patients recover than whether people see you as some sort of hero. I do what I do because I love it.”

He paused.

Raina mouthed, “You’ve got this, baby.”

“Something many of you might not know about me is that I had a couple of learning disorders when I was a child,” he went on. “Words and numbers never looked right, but I did grasp numbers much quicker than I did letters. The problem was, being a doctor has always been my dream, but for a while, I was the only person who believed I could attain such a lofty goal.”

He heard a few snuffles.

A few *awws*.

“I remember hearing my teachers calling me all sorts of names, and at the time, I believed them. See, another thing many of you might not know is that I didn’t grow up wealthy. I was born in Turkey and moved here as a child. My parents could barely speak English, and with them being poor and Muslim, we saw many more closed doors than open ones. But then, one day, I met a doctor from Uganda who also happened to be my best friend’s father. He helped me understand that I didn’t have to accept what people called me. ‘It’s their opinion,’ he would say, and that it wasn’t up to me to prove them wrong. My job wasn’t to base my life on making sure I ‘showed’ them. It was to build confidence in myself. So, I did.”

He gripped the award tighter.

Liberation, he’d been expecting, but telling his story made him realize what Raina had been telling him all along. He’d overcome a lot of obstacles that, at the time, had seemed permanent. Had he lived the other version of his

life, the inauthentic version, he would have buried the hard work that had led to his accomplishments as if success despite drawbacks was something to be ashamed of.

“I went to college, the first in my family, and then went to Georgetown for medical school. And while those might seem like great accomplishments, nothing’s greater than standing up here and seeing that I’ve been able to make a difference. The poor Turkish kid with the immigrant parents made a difference. He *makes* a difference. He matters to his students and his university, and then he married the most beautiful woman he’d ever set eyes on in his life.”

A few whistles floated around the room.

He grinned. “Thank you, again, for this recognition. I know people always say this, but let no one tell you that you were born to fail, whether it’s a parent, aunt, uncle, grandparent, teacher...whomever. Greatness waits on the other side of fear, and while it’ll be hard work to climb that hill, I guarantee it will be worth it. Now, my honey isn’t feeling well, so we’ll be leaving, but once again...thank you.”

He left the podium to applause, Delilah following. She slipped the award from his hand, and he picked Raina up again and headed for the exit.

Delilah drove while he sat with Raina in the backseat, his tuxedo jacket draped around her.

“I might have picked up the flu from that very last shoot I did,” she said. “A few people had scratchy throats.”

She closed her eyes.

When she opened them again, she immediately protested.

“Saraci, no.”

“Don’t fight us,” Delilah said.

He hoisted her out of the car and entered the hospital emergency room. If his hunch was correct, this was where she needed to be, even if it was just a “simple flu.”

He used his connections to get her a room in under two hours and sent Delilah home with the car. Thankfully, Delilah didn’t give him a hard time about staying at her sister’s bedside.

Raina was with her husband.

Her physician husband.

Who was obsessed with her.

She was in good hands.

“I don’t need to be here,” Raina argued, settling on the hospital bed. “They’re just going to give me fluids, break my fever with Tylenol, and send me home.”

He pulled a chair up next to the bed. “You might have a lowered immune system. If that’s the case, this *is* where you need to be.”

“A lowered immune system from the flu.”

“No. Not from the flu.”

She watched him from between sleepy eyelids. “Do you mean the stress of the holidays? I’ve been handling that well.”

“Not that.”

“Lucas, I haven’t backslid. The coping mechanisms I’ve learned over the years are still effective. The theme is that you and I are choosing to live our own lives, not overcome our pasts. We’ve made progress.”

“I’m not talking about the eating disorders,” he said. “I’m talking about your everlasting nausea.”

“It’s indigestion.”

“The headaches.”

“Because I was getting sick.”

“Rai, when was your last period?”

Her eyes flung open.

He recalled as many of their times together as he could. Since day one, it had been nonstop, even on the days when they should have been logically too tired to make love.

“Come inside me, Lucas.”

“I want to have your baby, Lucas.”

“I want it, Lucas.”

“I love how it feels spilling out of me.”

“I’m saying that I think you’re pregnant.”

“What would make you...” She looked up toward the ceiling as if recalling the same moments. “Okay, I see your point, but my last period was...well, they already weren’t regular.”

“How about this? Statistically, how often did I pull out? You’re better at mental math than I am.”

“Assuming we’ve had sex one hundred times, at least, you’ve pulled out...” She tapped an invisible calculator. “Yeah, I might be pregnant. Then, it didn’t help that I would wrap my legs around you. I’m sorry.”

“Trust me. I’m not.”

There’d been no better feeling than coming inside her hot, silky flesh, and they were both adults. They’d understood the risks. The sex just happened to be out of this world.

“We should probably get a test done while we’re here,” she said.

The hospital happily obliged them, and before midnight, they had their answer: Lucas and Raina Saraci were going to be parents.

Chapter Twenty-Three

They kept her overnight.

The hospital was *efficiently kind* enough to do an ultrasound to confirm what the bloodwork had shown. She appeared to be roughly six weeks along, and she'd held Lucas against her so often, she didn't know what memory of her keeping him hostage while telling him to come inside her was the big moment.

Fear didn't come.

At least, not the fear she'd expected.

The only two things she feared were how this would change things between her and Lucas, and she was terrified of anything happening to the little blip on the ultrasound monitor.

As far as her marriage, if he didn't want this, she was prepared to do it on her own. Lorelei was a single parent. Plus, she had a supportive and healthy family network. However, Raising a child alone meant she wouldn't have Lucas, and she loved him. She loved him with everything in her. She wanted this for *them*, not for herself, and it wasn't like they hadn't known their luck wouldn't have run out.

Yet, it made her wonder.

Did they *want* it to run out?

Despite slip-up after slip-up, they never talked about birth control, and there were many times when they'd had sex multiple times in one night. Multiple times was a lot of semen, chockfull of sperm, and it wasn't as if there'd been historical evidence of either one of them being infertile.

On the way home, neither she nor Lucas mentioned the baby. Even as they entered the house, they remained mum on the subject of future

parenthood. They'd said they didn't want kids, so it would probably be confusing if Lucas discovered how excited she was and had been since the initial shock of the news wore off.

Lucas brushed her lips with a kiss. "I'll take your stuff upstairs. Need anything?"

"I'm a little hungry," she said. "I'll throw something together. Any requests?"

"I'll do it. Relax." He kissed her again and lengthened the kiss with one hand at the back of her head. "I'll be right back. I mean it. Relax."

She took a seat on the sofa.

This wasn't how she'd pictured things going, but she'd never been more wrong about a person in her life. Lucas cared about her. She had no question about it. She'd been expecting him to spend the entire relationship trying to mold her into something he wanted and threatening to leave if she didn't conform.

But that was where she was wrong.

She was already what he wanted.

He never hid his interest in her when she'd spent the entire first half of their relationship hiding how much she *adored* him and his thorny personality, deft eyebrow raises, and long, surgeon's fingers. Perhaps he'd sensed it, so she hoped he also sensed this latest discovery.

He returned downstairs wearing an expression he'd been wearing since the hospital. It wasn't quite a smile, but there was a delicate lift to his mouth, as though he was at the cusp of breaking out into one.

"I can make you some soup," he offered. "Are you still feeling nauseous? I'll get started on the mint and lemon tea."

"Can we talk first?"

He sat next to her. "Sure."

"So," she wrung her hands, an uncharacteristic gesture for her, but she'd never been pregnant before, "what do you want to do?"

"What do you mean?"

"We're making a person. There are some decisions we have to make. I mean, do you want to move back to the condo? Do you want to get a place?"

"This wouldn't be a bad place to raise a baby," he pointed out. "We have more rooms than the condo, a neighborhood, and a backyard. It already feels like home."

The expression returned.

That almost smile.

“My place in North Carolina already has a few offers,” she said.

“Then I can reduce some of my main responsibilities and delegate others,” he added. “That way, I’m home more. I want to be present for our family.”

“Our family,” she echoed.

“Me, you, and,” he set a hand on her stomach, “this little one.”

“Lucas, I’m happy.”

His shoulders sagged with relief, and he pulled her into his arms. “Me too, Rai. I’m walking on clouds. I didn’t want to say anything because, you know, we never really discussed kids, but I’d be a liar if I said I haven’t been thinking about it, a lot, since I met you.”

“For me, a family makes sense with you.”

“I can’t imagine this with anyone else.”

She kissed his neck. “Maybe we should contact Davis, the realtor. We can talk about buying the house.”

He hesitated. “Yeah, we can do that.”

“Unless you already have.”

“I might have.”

She searched his face. “And you sold the condo.”

“We canceled the annulment. I got excited.”

“So, you’re really, truly happy?”

“Really, truly happy,” he said. “Plus, I can’t say I’m surprised. We did not try very hard.”

She burst out laughing. “*You* did.”

“Come on, Raina. Do you honestly think I couldn’t escape your little leg lock if I truly wanted to? When I’m inside you, and feeling good, and you’re looking at me with those eyes, there’s very little chance I’m going to come anywhere but inside you.”

“A few times, you managed to pull out.”

“Because I like coming on your ass, and your stomach, and your breasts. Then you’d lick it off, which is so damn sexy.” He clicked his tongue. “Huh. I’m realizing now that we had options. We really did not try very hard.”

She laughed harder and coughed into her elbow. He released her from his hold, coaxed her onto the sofa, and tucked a blanket around her before heading to the kitchen to make soup and tea.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Raina, lips parted, looked up at Lucas before turning back to her parents standing in the kitchen of her childhood home.

“So you knew?” she asked.

Her father set the rectangular cake box she’d handed him on the kitchen counter. “Raina, you’re both wearing matching rings, and it doesn’t matter which fingers you wear them on. Then you were wearing them when I visited that day, and we know wedding rings when we see them. Toss in the fact that you live together, and that Lucas called you his wife like six times when we were at you guys’ place...come on, sweetheart.”

Lucas chuckled.

She nudged him with her side.

“You’re a grown woman,” her mother added. “We would have liked to be part of it, but Raina, you’ve always made your own decisions. You’re very good at taking care of yourself. As parents, we’ve learned a lot over the years. We’ve learned that sometimes you can hold on too hard and expect so much of your children, they don’t tell you when they fall.”

Her father nodded. “Exactly. We have to trust that we laid a good foundation, and we’re learning to give you all space to come to us.”

She and Lucas had planned an entire speech. Yet, it appeared that her folks were growing *with* their children. She’d battled an eating disorder, O.B. had dealt with domestic violence, and Delilah had struggled with perfectionism and low self-confidence.

For all intents and purposes, they grew up with good parents in a healthy family, but there had still been things to learn and overcome.

“Can we open presents now?” Sanem called from the living room. “I

can't wait any longer!"

They agreed to open presents, and soon her parents' large living room floor was covered in gift wrap and the cardboard and plastic from newly-opened toys.

Lucas sat beside her, kissing the side of her head and whispering in her ear all that he would do to her later at the hotel; there was no way they would have been able to stay with her parents with the stuff that went on between them on a regular basis. Knowing he was the father of her child had turned her libido to the highest level on the nasty scale.

After opening presents, they moved the festivities to the large, heated back patio to keep an eye on the kids. O.B. suggested a card game, but Raina asked her mother to grab her a piece of cake first. Then Bridgette's scream rang from inside the house.

"Think he saw it?" Lucas asked.

Bridgette ran onto the patio, holding the cake. Then she tipped it forward for everyone to see the writing on the top:

Hey, Grandma!
Hey Grandpa!
See you in August!

Raina and Lucas were accosted with hugs that made Raina's entire face grow warm. Once everyone's excitement dulled to a relatively normal level, they set up for the card game.

Delilah opened the pack of cards. "Oh, wow," she said. "It's a good thing we're playing Spades and not poker. If one person happened to get all the cards on the bottom of this deck, they would have had a Royal Flush."

Lucas frowned. "Let me see those?"

He took the cards and sifted through them while Raina chewed on her bottom lip. When he faced her, she shrugged and innocently rolled her eyes.

He returned the cards to Delilah, crossed the room, held both sides of her face, and kissed her all over her face until they were accused of trying to delay the start of the game.

They sat out the first round.

Lucas brought her down onto his lap on one of the patio loveseats and held onto her like he thought she'd fly away if he let go. All the while, he whispered how happy he was to have her.

As he gently nuzzled her neck.

Epilogue

“Hello, ma’am. I got a call about a gas leak?”

Raina tightened her towel. “Yes. I think I smell gas.”

Lucas, in full firefighter get-up, entered the house through the front door.

“Where’s it coming from?”

“The kitchen, I think.”

Nodding, he went to the kitchen while she followed, and he made a show of checking for gas near the stove and around the dryer in the adjacent laundry room.

Raina “nervously” chewed on her bottom lip, naked except for the Egyptian cotton wrapped around her. There was no threat of pregnancy, and knowing that they were starting a family meant it was as if they did nothing else these days but remained joined at the pelvis.

“Ma’am?” Sighing, Lucas faced her. “I don’t smell any gas, and I can’t find any leaks.”

“Oh.” Her shoulders slumped. “I’m sorry.”

“We take our jobs very seriously down at the Dick-You-Down Fire Station, Number Nine.”

She choked on a laugh before quickly regaining her composure. “What does that mean?” she asked, feigning innocence.

“It means that every time I come out here, that’s taxpayer dollars, and we have to recoup those funds somehow.”

“Um...I don’t have a ton of money.”

“With all this house?” He motioned around. “Do you really expect me to believe that?”

“Sir, all of my money goes into the house. Are you sure there are no other

forms of payment you accept?”

Lucas scratched the back of his head. “Well, back in the eighteen hundreds, we did occasionally accept a different type of currency, and no one has changed the bylaws since.”

“And what’s that?”

“Pussy, ma’am. Now, might you have any here?”

She squared her shoulders. “I might.”

“Is it wet?”

“Do you take dripping wet pussy? It might be a little warm, though.”

He groaned. “I guess I can take that.”

The towel fell, and the way he took in her naked body was almost enough to bring her to climax without a single touch.

“Seeing as how this was a gas leak, ma’am,” he removed his suspender straps, “I’ll need about three or four rounds of pussy. Think you might have that in you?”

“Rounds or pounds?”

“Rounds,” he clarified. “Don’t worry about the pounding. I’ll take care of that part.”

She throbbed all over.

He picked her up and set her on her back on the kitchen island, a favorite location of theirs, then parted her with his fingers.

“Mm-hmm. Yep. This looks like prime pussy.”

She looked down at him. “Will it do?”

“I think so, but first,” he lowered his head, “let me taste a sample.”

Thank you for reading!

xoxo,

K. Alex

About the Author

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* * *

I'm a creative creature from the Caribbean who likes animals, Star Wars, quirky humor, and any kind of media that deals with people finding love in an otherwise impossible time.

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