



LUCIEN



SASHA CLINTON

LUCIEN AND I

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ONE

Memo: Do NOT kill Lucien Stone in a fit of rage.

Mira

On Monday, I jerk awake at 4 am. It's my weekday ritual—to wake up suddenly at unsociable hours and reach for my pager to check if an emergency has erupted overnight.

I'm expecting a transfer patient with a gunshot wound or an emergency cardiac tamponade case that must be managed immediately, or even the floor nurse's passive-aggressive rant on how the male patient who got a bypass three days ago has been giving her 'the look' and that she thought it appropriate to give him sedatives.

When you're a thirty-four-year-old with no social life, no hobbies, and barely any time to sleep, you take whatever form of entertainment you can get.

There's nothing, though. No news. No villainous pager ringing on my nightstand. I'm not on call today, meaning I'm not even in possession of the pager. Meaning I just woke up because of a subconscious fear/nightmare of having someone die because I was sleeping.

Typical.

Once my eyes are open, I can't go back to sleep. I wash my face and wander around the teeny-tiny studio apartment I rent. But wandering about like a ghost only occupies my frazzled mind for a few minutes. By 4:50 a.m., I'm clad in

workout clothes and heading out for a run on the frozen, snow-covered streets.

In the building lobby, I stretch my hands over my head and warm up. Then I stick in my AirPods, turn on my playlist of loud, Top 100 hits, and step outside. The chilly air stings my eyes which are already red from lack of sleep. I turned in at 10:30 pm yesterday, early by anyone's standards, but I couldn't sleep much.

The streets are mostly empty, but let's be real, this is Manhattan. It's never really deserted. The shops that line both sides of the road are closed, but there's light and movement in some of them. Probably just the owners getting in early to set things up for the day.

Snow is scattered on the side of the sidewalk like white dust. A headband keeps my ears warm, but my nose burns with the bite of the freezing morning air.

The building I live in is a co-op apartment building. And there's another high-luxury apartment building just opposite it. That's the one where Lucien Stone lives.

And speaking of the devil...

His silhouette unfurls from the entrance at what has to be the most perfectly coincidental time ever. I swear I must be imagining it because it feels like he's staring right at me, even though he's not even looking in my direction.

I clutch my iPod tightly. No matter how much I want to rip my gaze away, it sticks to him like iron filings to a magnet.

He's clad in his regular exercise gear—black running shorts and running jacket, warm black tights underneath, to protect his legs from the cold. In the all-black attire, he should look ready to attend a funeral, but instead he looks ready to model on the runway of the New York fashion week. If I was making a picture dictionary, I'd put his image right next to the words 'hot', 'immaculate', and 'sexy'.

Thick, black hair brushes over his eyebrows with his face angled down as he bends down to lace up his shoes. His high, sculpted cheekbones, perfectly straight nose, and full, luscious

lips make him look too ethereal to belong against the backdrop of an average street in New York. I sometimes wonder why he didn't get into acting since his aunt, Maxima Anderson, is an A-list actress. He has the connections and the looks. Plus, the colossal ego and self-confidence required to excel in Hollywood.

A single loud bass note from my iPod startles me and shocks Lucien's attention to me. I pressed it by mistake. Shit.

He detaches himself from the building and begins to saunter toward me.

"Good morning, Mira!" He waves across the distance to me, all eager to ruin my morning.

"Too late, Luci" I say, using the nickname only I ever call him by. Luci. Short for both Lucien and Lucifer. A fitting name for a guy who is basically an asshole with an angelic face. "My morning was good before I ran into you."

"It was good before, but it's awesome now, right?" He runs his long fingers through the dark, wet strands of his hair. "Can't help it. I brighten up everybody's life."

I shake my head. "I wonder how you manage to contain that massive ego in your tiny body. It just doesn't seem scientifically possible."

"Ego is a philosophical construct. It doesn't require physical space."

"Yours definitely does." I rub my eyes. They're watering because of how little I've slept and how long I spent staring at the computer screen yesterday.

I could stand here and banter with Lucien all day, because that's our default, but I need to get in shape, so I begin to run. Luci falls into step beside me effortlessly. I'm not surprised that he's faster than me or that he doesn't even stop to catch his breath every two minutes. Being annoying, perfect, and annoyingly perfect all at the same time is Lucien's most prominent personality trait, after all.

I pull out my AirPods and stuff them into the pocket at the back of my leggings. Whatever motivation Alicia Keys' Girl

On Fire can give me, competing with Luci can give me more.

“You’re up early today.” Lucien turns sideways to study me, his sharp nose cutting an imposing profile against the gray sky flecked with white clouds. “I thought you might appreciate my brilliant company. Not many people out at this hour.”

He stops just short of saying, “It’s not safe for you to be exercising alone in the wee hours of the morning,” even though I can see that he’s itching to rub my recklessness in my face. But saying something like that would come across as ‘caring’ about me. And Luci’s very conscious about preserving his confident, detached, super-genius image.

Lucien Stone would never do something as useless as waste his emotions worrying about me. Don’t I know that.

“I didn’t realize we’d become running partners,” I say.

“Come on now, we’re colleagues who just happen to have the same exercise routine.”

Just happen to? He doesn’t know half of it.

It was the desire to compete with him that made me take up running in the first place. Before that, I used to be extremely unhealthy and out of shape, binging on junk food and avoiding any physical exertion. But once I realized how everybody was complimenting him and how often he gloated about his own body, I couldn’t stand losing to him.

With Luci and me, everything is a competition. We’ve been rivals since high school. I’m not sure why I started trying to one-up him at everything. Maybe it was because I couldn’t stand his smug, confident smile or the way he acted like a genius or perhaps the fact that he was actually a genius. Now that I think about it, I’m sure it was a combination of two things: the first being my inexplicable, hopeless crush on him that he brushed off when he refused to associate with me in school. I had to recover my lost confidence somehow and what better way than beating the guy who rejected me at everything? The second reason is because my mom complimented him at the science fair and told him that she wished she had a smart son like him. My mom, the woman

who has never paid any attention to me or praised me for anything. I know it's childish, but once I started trying to outdo him, I couldn't stop.

I applied to the same Ivy League schools as him because I wanted to beat him. I enrolled in pre-med on a full scholarship because I wanted to beat him. I got into med school on a full scholarship because I wanted to beat him.

Though I was burned out and ready to say bye-bye to medical education after my five-year-long general surgery residency, once I heard that Lucien Stone was planning to apply for a cardiothoracic surgery fellowship in New York, I couldn't let myself fall behind.

Of course, he was going to subspecialize. The overachiever in him could never be satisfied being *just* a general surgeon.

Our footsteps drive into the sidewalk, echoing in unison. His presence is like a thorn in my side. I'm too aware of him. Too aware of the silence between us. Too aware of his musky scent and the cadence of his breaths as they skim past my ears. My world is momentarily reduced to a bubble where only the two of us exist, comfortably carrying out our morning routine together. Pointless details like how sexy he looks with his morning stubble edge out important details like how I'm on call starting today and how I need to do something about my meals for the week before I starve to death.

Sometimes, I wonder if I'll ever find someone else whom I can fixate on to this extent. In a less unhealthy way, obviously.

A dark and gloomy sky stretches overhead, threatening unseasonal rain. Realizing that I've been daydreaming while ignoring my cardio, I pick up the speed, hoping I can shake Lucien off, but he matches my pace without much effort. By the time I've covered half a mile, I'm puffing for breath. I slow down, wanting to stop and sit down for a bit, but I don't want Lucien to think I lack stamina and take breaks. I know he doesn't.

So I yawn, rubbing my hands together, pretending to be totally fine. "It's so cold today."

“You look tired.” Lucien’s sea-blue eyes are pinned on me. I can’t make out if what’s in them is condescension, pity, or actual concern. Luci’s very confusing like that. His emotions translate so badly on his face, like the signal from his neurons got lost somewhere in between. He looks angry when he’s happy, excited when he’s sad...he’s one of those people who are impossible to read.

“Couldn’t sleep,” I admit, inhaling and exhaling in giant gulps like a dying whale. Mortification crushes my entire body. He must think I’m so unfit.

But Lucien doesn’t make a big deal out of it, which is almost as jarring as the ambulance siren that rings in the air at that moment, startling me.

“You’re always nervous the morning your week on-call starts,” he says when the noise has faded. “You sleep badly on those days.”

“That’s not true.”

“It happened last time, and the time before that, and the time before—”

“Okay, I get it.”

I don’t know what’s more disturbing here—the fact that Luci knows me better than I know myself or the fact that he’s boasting about it.

But he’s right. I’m worried. Being on-call is every surgeon’s nightmare. An entire week where I have to show up at the hospital whenever I’m called. Late-night emergencies. People on the verge of death. Early morning 12-hour surgery shifts. The pager keeps ringing all the time so I can’t get any sleep. It’s brutal. By day three, I start to question if subspecializing in heart surgery was the best outlet for my masochism. Wouldn’t being a sexual submissive or frequenting one of New York’s underground S&M clubs serve the purpose better and in a more pleasurable manner?

Now, I do love being a doctor. It’s pretty rewarding. The feeling I get when I save someone’s life or perform a difficult operation successfully is great. I feel like I’m the smartest

person alive. I feel like my hands are serving the world. I don't think that with my driven, competitive, challenge-seeking nature, I'd be happier doing anything else.

Plus, Luci doesn't want to become a sexual submissive. He wants to become the number one cardiothoracic surgeon.

And since I'm better than him, I must do that, too, and do it better than him.

I must show my mother that she was wrong. That I'm the real genius here, not him.

"Oh, by the way, are you free on Wednesday?" I ask, suddenly remembering that's the anniversary day of one of our colleagues and we need to do something about it.

Lucien raises a single eyebrow in bemusement. "Well, if you're looking for lessons on how to hold a scalpel, I can make myself available."

"Oh, shut up," I say. Is there no end to this guy's egomania? "I don't need lessons on surgery from you. You're not *that* good."

"Yes, I am. I'm a gift to medicine. Haven't you heard the attendings say that enough times by now?"

"That doesn't make it true."

"Just admit it. You're jealous of my talent."

"No. I'm not. Because you don't have any." But in reality, I am. I'm jealous of everything about him, from that delicious, Greek-god body to his parents' insane wealth to how much he is loved by everyone. But most of all, I'm jealous of his confidence. I feel like shit all the time. I'd love to be high on whatever he's high on.

Lucien clicks his tongue. "Futile resistance to the truth is called ignorance."

"Why don't you quit surgery and go into dictionary writing? You could have a future in that."

"Can't. The medical profession won't be able to handle a loss that big."

“Jeez, you’re being insufferable so early in the morning.” I groan. I pretend to be irritated by him, but I secretly enjoy bantering with him. It’s pretty stimulating. He’s probably the only person I know who is on my mental level when it comes to witty quips. I hate it that I sometimes enjoy the stuff that comes out of his mouth. He can be pretty funny on occasion. “Luci, listen, I’m about to get a headache. How about we make a deal? I’ll give you \$500 in cash if you start running in the opposite direction right now.”

“Five hundred? My shoes cost more than that,” Lucien deadpans.

I grind my teeth in frustration. Right. My mistake. I forgot for a second that Lucien Stone is a rich spoiled brat who wears \$4,500 sneakers on a daily basis. His concept of money is completely different from mine. I once heard him call his \$10,000 suit a ‘bargain’.

“I don’t want money,” he continues.

“Then I could trade shifts with you on another day. Don’t you want a day off?”

“Why would I? I love working.”

I execute the world’s slowest eye roll. “Are you even human?”

“Sometimes, I wonder about that myself.” Lucien looks skyward. “Just yesterday, a woman called me ‘god’.”

“Was she high?”

“No, but she was having an orgasm.”

I choke. Why? Why? Why would he say that?

“Eww. Can you not boast about your hookups early in the morning?” I say, my voice sounding cold and distant even to me.

“Sorry if hearing about my personal life made you jealous.”

“Personal life? We both know you don’t have that. You work all day.”

“Not all night, though.”

I can't help but smile at that. It's such a Lucien thing to say.

“Are you smirking right now?” My mouth goes dry when I turn and find Lucien's gaze raking my lips. The hairs on my body stand up on end like I'm in the middle of the crucial bit in a tough surgery. Lucien's eyes don't casually skim over me. They sear into my skin with their intensity, leaving an imprint on my cells.

I quickly school my features into the most poker-faced expression ever. “No. Why would I smile? I'm with you. That's enough to ruin my mood.”

He drops a thick sigh. But he's still watching me. I'm not sure what's there to analyze so carefully about my bargain basement workout clothes except how poorly made they are. I'll admit, though, that my legs are looking super toned these days. Long and shapely. To be honest, I wouldn't mind Luci checking them out and feeling jealous at all.

In fact, I'd love to witness that.

I clear my throat, and he suddenly speaks up, like he feels compelled to defend himself for looking at me. Like there could be no possible reason why someone who has everything like he does would ever be interested in checking out someone like me. Me—daughter of poor immigrants, lacking genius IQ, and barely average looking. He doesn't say it in so many words, but I can sense it. I hate this supercilious side of him the most. Because it cuts me where it hurts. I'm over my crush on him, but it still hurts.

“How much did those cost?” he asks, pointing at my pink running shoes. “They look cheap.”

“They *are* cheap. I bought them while they were on sale. Don't remember how much I paid for them.”

“Do you buy everything on sale?”

The real answer to that question is yes. But I proudly declare, “There's nothing wrong with saving money. We're not all born with a silver spoon.”

Lucien scratches his head, pondering over my words. “I’ve never shopped for anything at a sale. I want to do it.”

He says that with a reverence like one would say ‘I want to climb Mt. Everest’. I can’t understand rich people at all.

“You want to buy cheap shoes when you can buy ones that cost half your monthly salary? How insensible.” I open my mouth in mock horror.

Luci frowns. “I’m sure even cheap shoes would look good on me. Everything looks good on me.”

I groan. Not because he’s being vain again, but because I actually agree with him. I’ve never come across him wearing anything that wasn’t flattering on him.

“Confident, much—”

My words fade out as I trip over a bump in the sidewalk. Gravity sucks me down so fast, that I’m certain I’m going to smash my nose against the ground and break it. But before that can happen, Lucien’s fingers dig into my upper arm. His other hand curves around my waist and he pulls me upright, spinning me around until I meet his solid chest.

And just like that, the two of us are almost hugging in the middle of the street. Not something I ever imagined would happen with the two of us. The intimacy of my breasts smooshed against him, my knees against his, and his heat pressing into me makes something sweet and dangerous sing through my veins. My whole body vibrates with new awareness, like something that once lay coiled under my skin has awakened.

I breathe hard. I have no interest in putting words to what this feeling is.

Some things are better when they stay buried.

Lucien’s fingers are still pressed into me. The last time we touched was probably when we both reached for a vascular clamp at the same time in the operating room months ago and our fingers brushed.

“Are you planning to crush my arm so I can never perform surgery again?” I jerk away from him. “I’ll admit; it’s a clever tactic.”

He lets go of me, hiding his hand behind his back like he’s embarrassed at what he did.

“I hope this is not a regular occurrence during your morning runs,” Lucien says in a cold, cutting tone. “They should put out a warning for the streets to watch out when you’re on them.”

“Oh, please, don’t think you’re all that just because you grabbed my hand in time. I could’ve saved myself. I didn’t ask you to play *knight in shining armor*.” I flip back my ponytail.

Lucien raises an eyebrow. “I guess a decade of medical education hasn’t taught you how to say thank you.”

“Thank you,” I yell because even if studying medicine hasn’t taught me manners, it has taught me to take criticism and improve myself.

Then I swivel on my heel and begin to run faster.

We cover the rest of our laps in relative silence. Despite how inhuman Luci is, I suppose he gets tired, too. He can’t keep cranking out all those snarky lines when his muscles are burning and he doesn’t have enough oxygen in his body.

People start to appear everywhere. My face is growing hot with exertion. My heart’s about to give out if I don’t slow down. But my willpower pushes me. I take a shortcut back to my apartment. If he notices, he doesn’t comment on it. The air between us is loaded with anger and taut tension. I’m relieved when the run ends.

“Don’t trip on your way up the elevator,” Lucien calls out to me as we part ways in front of our apartment buildings. “Wait. Does your building even have an elevator?”

“You just don’t know when to stop, do you?” I call back.

We spear each other with dirty looks until a pedestrian breaks our staring contest. Dissatisfied with the outcome, I

barrel back to my apartment. Lucien, too, marches to his expensive fortress, not looking back even once.

Today's showdown results: nobody wins.

TWO

Lucien

“Actor?” asks the Starbucks barista at 6 am that morning, playing her usual game of ‘What do you do for a living?’ She’s a new part-timer and has persisted with this guessing game for three mornings straight, which would be ever since she first started working in this branch of Starbucks.

I don’t have time to entertain her or her attempt at flirting, though. Not when I have a surgery scheduled for 6:30 am. I’m in serious doctor mode right now.

I shake my head, flashing her an impatient smile as she spends an inordinately long time ringing up my order. I hiss under my breath, stealing multiple glances at my Apple Watch, praying for her to hurry up.

She misses the hint and takes another shot. “A nightclub host?”

“Try again.”

“Can’t you give me a clue?”

Okay. I’m tired. This needs to end today. I cross my arms and stare down at the girl, looking as intimidating as a six-foot-one guy like me ought to look.

“I’m a cardiothoracic surgery fellow,” I say. The girl stares at me blankly. Of course. “I’m a surgeon who operates on hearts.” Technically, cardiothoracic surgery also includes the lungs and other pleural or mediastinal structures inside the

thoracic cavity, but this isn't the time or place to give a science lesson.

“Oh, a heart surgeon!” She beams.

“Exactly.”

“Wow, you must be smart.”

“You're figuring that out only now?” After three days of seeing me? Inconceivable.

She breaks into a fit of giggles, then finally, FINALLY, rings up my order and I move out of the line to await my hot cup of Americano.

While I'm waiting on my order, my phone beeps with a message. It's from my father. Between my mother and him, it's a miracle I manage one second of peace in a day.

I skim the message. It's the same old thing. Dinner meeting with the chief of cardiothoracic surgery at his hospital.

...It'd be nice to get some clarity on what you're getting into with your first job. He'll answer all your questions as well as discuss our generous compensation options.

The text goes on and on, detailing 401k plans.

I tap my head, which is throbbing with a headache just from reading this long-winded text. I don't bother replying.

The problem with my parents is that they've never cared for what I've wanted. Not only that, they take every opportunity to undercut each other in any way possible. Then they make me feel guilty for letting them down because somehow it's my fault that my parents can't make their relationship work and hate each other. As if I haven't suffered enough for the sake of their egos already. Throughout my childhood, my mother kept me on a strict diet so I wouldn't gain weight while forcing me to take cello lessons, play football, learn Mandarin and expecting me to be great at every one of them.

“Because you're a Stone. You must be perfect. You're not like other children. You have a legacy to live up to.” That's my

parents' favorite line. It's the only parenting refrain they know.

Anyway, this is their current play: they both want me to work at *their* hospital after my fellowship ends this year. Which is a pain because they don't work at the same hospital and I don't want to pick one over the other.

Also, I don't want to be the pawn that gets sacrificed in their power struggles. Been there. Done that. Not doing it again.

I mean, if there's anything I've learned in life, it's that no matter what I do, people find a reason to resent me. To find fault with me. So now I don't waste my time trying to become what other people want me to be. It's better to be shallow and live life in the moment.

"Luci." The barista, this time a bulky man, calls out my name, then, when I appear to claim the drink, he blinks in confusion. "Luci? That your real name?"

"It's Lucien." But I like Luci. Only Mira calls me by that nickname. So it feels special.

"Lucien. That girl over there asked me to give this to you." He points at the giggly counter girl with a penchant for getting my career wrong, before sliding a piece of paper along with my coffee.

It has her number scrawled on it along with her name. Monica.

I immediately crumple the note.

"I'm not interested." The words tumbling out of my mouth make no sense. Monica is exactly my type—she's pretty, legal, and into me. What am I doing, blowing my chances like this?

"She wanted to give this to you herself but she can't take a break right now."

I grab my coffee. "Tell her I'm not the one for her. And that someday, she'll find someone who is."

Without waiting for a response, I stride out, trying to block out the guilt and questions buzzing through my mind.

What am I doing? What's wrong with me?

Once again, I'm reminded of the unwelcome fact that I've been celibate for a long, long time. This is as embarrassing as it is an inhuman feat of self-control given that on an average day, I get hit on by no less than three women.

I don't want to examine too closely why I've stopped being interested in women or sex.

I never used to be like this.

I never had standards as a resident. I hooked up with whoever (as long as they were legal.) Until I realized that while that was always satisfying, it was never fulfilling.

I'm still trying to figure out what fulfilling means.

Chilly air threads through my hair as I cross the street to get to the hospital. I take a large gulp of my coffee without a care about how hot it is. It burns my throat and tongue going down, but it's a nice burn. It's *something*, which is more than I've felt in a long time.

When I enter the hospital, it's quiet. The receptionist greets me. I change into scrubs and head in for my first procedure for the day, where I'm assisting an attending surgeon in performing a coronary artery bypass graft, though I'll be doing most of the work since I'm supposed to be learning to perform procedures independently.

This CABG is meant to improve blood flow and oxygen supply to the heart. In this case, the plan is to take an artery from the inside of the left chest and a vein from the patient's leg to do the bypasses onto her heart. It's open-heart surgery, so relatively major.

But I've done enough of these over the last two years that I'm able to get through with enough concentration and effort. It's over in less than three hours.

When I exit the operating room, Mira also exits another operating room donning her scrubs. I cannot explain why my entire body freezes at such a mundane sight. I see her in this outfit almost every day. But maybe this morning has made me realize that she's starting to beat me in the fitness department.

Or has she always looked like this? Like a long-limbed fairy. And I've been too preoccupied with comparing her case log statistics with mine to notice.

She moves gracefully like she's dancing as she glides over to me.

I don't realize I'm holding my breath until she tells me that I look like I've seen a ghost. And that she'd be overjoyed if the ghost managed to take me to the ghostly realm with it.

I cough. "What procedure did you do? Mine was a CABG."

"The same," she replies.

"How'd it go?"

"Obviously, it was a success. Since I was the one doing it," she replies.

I scoff. We've been together so long; I think we're rubbing off a little on each other. She never used to toot her own horn like this. That's something *I* excel at.

"You two are at it again?" A feminine voice chimes in, interrupting our conversation. "Don't you ever get tired?"

Amanda Lin—also a cardiothoracic surgery fellow like Mira and me—walks up behind Mira and puts an arm around her shoulder. With her blonde pixie cut hair coupled with an elfish face and petite frame, she could be mistaken for a mythical creature from a fairytale that got lost on her way to the unicorn ball and ended up in the boring surgery unit of the Langone Medical Center by mistake.

"It's just our personal rivalry," I say. "A little competition never hurt anyone"

"Personal? All the staff at this hospital know that you've been at each other's throats since the very first day of your fellowship." She shakes her head at the two of us. "Can't you just get along?"

"Getting along is overrated." Mira raises her eyebrows at me.

I nod. “Yeah. I’d rather die than lie to her face that she’s a competent surgeon just because she’s my friend.”

Amanda hisses.

“Watch it, Luci.” Mira moves her finger through the air in a cutting motion in front of her throat. “I’m competent enough to make a nice little cut on your neck right where your carotid artery is.”

I don’t doubt she has the ability to do what she claims. But I’m not letting her win this one. Even insulting each other is a competition for us. Whoever gets to have the last word wins.

I step forward until I’m leaning into her face. “Bad idea. If you dishonor the Hippocratic oath, you’ll be stripped of your license.”

“No, I won’t.” A lopsided, villainous grin spreads across her lips. She cocks her head, and a tendril of black hair falls across her forehead. “Since you’re not going to live to tell the tale.”

True. A carotid artery bleed would result in death within five to fifteen seconds. And if she cuts the jugular vein, too, I’m dead instantly. A shudder passes through my body. She has this all planned out perfectly in her head. How long has she been scheming to murder me? I’m torn between admiration and fear for her level of detail orientation.

“You’re in the wrong profession. You should’ve been an assassin for hire,” I remark.

“When all the people worth killing are right here? No thanks.”

Amanda clicks her tongue. “Stop it, you two. I can’t believe you’re discussing murder in the hospital. We save people’s lives here.”

I crane my neck, visually sweeping over the hallway. A row of operating rooms. A near-empty hallway. The nurse’s station. Not a lot of nurses are on duty today. Most of the patients’ caretakers are either at the ICU or being briefed at the doctor’s offices.

“Nobody can hear us,” I say.

Amanda drops her shoulder with a moan. “I just hope one day you both grow up and realize that tearing each other down is a stupid way to feel good about yourself.”

“I’m not doing this to feel good about myself,” I say. It’s true. I already feel pretty good about myself. I just need to prove my worthiness to the one person who seems to constantly treat me like I am an airheaded, spoiled brat who only gets to perform surgeries because my parents are loaded. Also, in a way, I think it actually pushes me to be a better doctor and work harder. Isn’t that the whole point of a rivalry, anyway?

“By the way,” Amanda continues. “I need to show you these new pictures of Ruby and me. She just got a haircut.”

Mira and I exhale a long-suffering sigh in unison, realizing where this is going. Amanda whips out her phone and flashes her new wallpaper at us—once again, a cute pic with her wife, Ruby, this time with furry cat ears. It is a daily ritual here at the cardiothoracic surgery department. Amanda and Ruby got married three months ago and I have never seen a more nauseatingly in-love couple in my lifetime. They take couple selfies. Every. Single. Day. And lucky me, I get to see them all, at work.

“It must be true love if Ruby is okay with you showing no-makeup selfies of her to your colleagues,” Mira remarks.

“She isn’t shallow. Looks don’t matter in love.”

“I don’t think anything matters in love,” I mutter, eyes unconsciously locking onto my black-haired rival. “Not even their personality.”

“It’s true. Love is mysterious.” This time, the person who inserts himself into the conversation is Amir, the fourth member of our elite club of cardiothoracic surgery fellows.

He’s the only guy I know who’s taller than me. With his curly dark hair and angular features, he frequently gets mistaken for an athlete. I heard from the receptionist that they had to order custom-made scrubs for him.

“I’m so glad you’re here to support me.” Amanda taps him on the shoulder, which she reaches only because she’s on tiptoes.

“Of course. We’re both married. We know something these two don’t.”

I scoff. “And what would that be? The secrets of the universe?”

“We know how to be in a long-term relationship.”

I loop my finger in the space between Mira and me, staring pointedly at Amir. “This is a long-term relationship, too. We’ve been rivals for more than a decade.”

“I guess so,” Mira adds.

“I can’t believe it. How twisted are they that they call what they have a relationship?” Amanda drops her jaw, trading a terrified look with Amir. “I swear; this rivalry has warped you two. I don’t think anybody would want to be involved with you both.”

“That’s fine. I don’t want to be in a relationship, either,” I assert. I’m okay with whatever I have. Even if, currently, that is celibacy.

“He’s too busy playing around.” Mira throws me a dirty look. I suppose she’s recalling what I told her this morning.

She was having an orgasm.

It was a lie. Because I can’t stand losing to Mira. But also because, I wanted to see how she’d react. If she...maybe feels something for me? Something positive? It’s not like I hate Mira. I want her to like me as a colleague even if I want to beat her as a surgeon. Also, our constant animosity has been getting a little tiring and repetitive of late.

I’ve been trying to be nicer to her. I woke up early today so she didn’t have to run alone in the cold weather. But she was utterly disgusted by my company and hated the fact I tried to keep her from falling, even though I was simply being nice. So I think it was a complete failure.

Maybe it was too much too fast. Or maybe Mira doesn't want niceness from me. Or anything else. I mean, there's the fact that she tried to friend-zone me in high school even though I strongly hinted to her time and again through long gazes and constant compliments that I was attracted to her. Mira can be dense sometimes—or maybe that's what I want to think so I can protect my ego. Because the alternative is that she wasn't into me at all and will never see me as more than an arrogant, rich brat.

“Forget it,” Amanda says, sneakily clicking something on her phone.

And just like that, the whole gang is here. All the CS fellows gathered in the middle of the hallway to coo at Amanda and Ruby's honeymoon photos for the sixteenth time this month. It's pure torture.

Tension stiffens my shoulders when the pager in Mira's hand rings with an incoming text. Her brows furrow as she reads it. It's probably from the emergency department. She fires a sharp exhale through her nose.

“Bad news?” Amir inquires.

“A 42-year-old male patient who was shot came to emergency just now. I gotta go. This looks serious. Could be an acute tamponade.”

She brushes past me, pager pasted to her hands, the sharp beeps interspersed with silence ratcheting up the tension.

“Don't die, don't die, don't die,” Mira mutters under her breath. Her face is red and sweaty. Her footsteps thud over the floor like falling rocks as she rushes to the emergency department.

I know I'm not on call and it's not my job, but I follow her. I just can't leave her alone.

A gunshot wound is especially tricky since most patients die within a relatively short time of being brought in, especially if the bullet has penetrated deep enough to damage the coronary artery or cause a blockage. Their heart could already be bleeding at this stage.

Saving them will more often than not require open-chest emergency surgery to repair the damaged organ or relieve pressure caused by blockage or collapse of a ventricle, and even then, there's no guarantee of survival. These are the most harrowing cases that come to us. The first surgery where I 'failed' was also a gunshot case. The patient, only fifteen, died in the operating room in front of my eyes, heart bleeding like a fountain.

I remember being stuck, not knowing what to do, even though the attending physician was supervising me.

Now, I'm not usually affected by deaths. It's a daily occurrence in this job. But the fact that his death was because of my failure was something that made it hard for me to move on.

You can't save them all, is what the attending says.

But sometimes, the only way to save yourself is by saving them all.

THREE

Mira

I know Luci's following me. He trails me like an amateur detective who doesn't understand the first thing about stealth, the loud, erratic thumps of his procedure shoes driving into my ears.

"Go away," I shout without giving him the pleasure of arcing back to look at his face. My voice makes quite a few people jump and wonder what's wrong. "Don't you have anything better to do than see me lose a patient?"

"You must be a psychic if you can predict his death without laying eyes on him." Lucien catches up to me the way he did this morning, with nothing more than an effortlessly long stride, and it's just as irritating as it was at 5 am. We're facing life and death here, but he still has the energy to smirk irritatingly at me. And some part of me finds his calmness under pressure attractive.

Because, me? I'm the opposite of cool and collected. My heart is jackhammering itself to death inside my teeny tiny ribcage. It's bad enough that I have to massage my chest to relieve the tightness. Anxiety has constricted my throat. My mind pores over the possibilities of what I'll witness in the emergency room. Helplessness ices my veins. Will I be able to do anything?

"Um..." I wheeze. It's too much to try to talk while I'm also running and trying to breathe. The emergency department

comes into view, the cacophony of sirens and beeping sounds and shouting filtering into my ears across the distance. My muscles harden, putting up resistance, refusing to do my bidding anymore. But I can't afford to go soft. Not with Lucien chasing my back like a lion hunting for its prey.

"Statistically speaking, less than thirty percent of gunshot wound cases survive," I say, mostly to make myself feel better.

A long, loud exhale pushes through Lucien's mouth. "Statistically speaking, most people give up before they try."

"That's not an actual statistic."

"It should be. You're already part of that statistic."

"Don't get on my nerves, Luci." I ball my hands into fists. "I'm already *this* close to losing it."

"I'd love to see you lose. It's my favorite pastime."

I examine him out of the corner of my eye and he actually dares to point at me. Like this is some childish game of 'I'm better than you'. Which, I admit, it is. That's what it has always been and why should it change just because a forty-something-year-old stranger is bleeding to death fifteen feet away?

We've made fun of each other under more dire circumstances. Once, I teased Luci while we were in the operating room and made him lose his concentration and drop his forceps. It's one of my prouder moments, even though the program director reamed us out for that one. Since then, we've kept our animosity to a minimum during surgical procedures.

I close my eyes and take a deep breath. That's right. I can't lose to Lucien. I can't lose the patient. I can't lose my cool. There's so much that cannot be lost. I must win.

In the emergency room, the patient's already lying down, moaning in pain while being given fluid infusion.

I bend down and study the rather well-built Caucasian man who looks pale, agitated, and disoriented. He's mumbling but not making too many other sounds. Plus, he's having trouble

swallowing, which is an indication that I need to check for cardiac tamponade, or blockage around the heart.

“The ER physician already saw him and thought it was best to call a surgeon,” the nurse says.

I nod in understanding. “Vitals?”

“Thirty-six to forty respirations per minute. Blood pressure 50mm Hg systolic.” She rattles off the numbers. His blood pressure is very low. That’s not great.

I press my thumb to his wrist to take his pulse. “His pulse is almost normal. How did he get shot?”

“Um...” The nurse stalls. “I think it was a gang war. The person who came with him could tell you more. He’s waiting outside.”

“Wow, how exciting. I’ve always wanted to treat someone in the mafia. Lucky you, Mira.” Lucien claps his hands like this is some theatrical production on Broadway.

I snap my fingers at him. “I’m not in the mood for your bad jokes. Make yourself useful and find his family.”

He just folds his arms in front of his chest and watches over me like he’s my boss. Then he nods, salutes, mutters, “Yes, ma’am,” and disappears from my sight.

I cut the patient’s clothes so I can see the wound on his chest, right below the third intercostal space. There isn’t a lot of blood and just the sight makes me wonder if it’s a good or bad sign. But I have to do my job. It’s the first thing you learn as a surgeon. The people on the operating table may be living, breathing people but I have to treat them just like bodies without getting attached to the life they may have had. Unproductive thoughts will only dull my mind.

“Any allergies?” I ask the nurse.

“The guy who came with him said none,” she replies.

“No exit wound,” I remark.

If there’s no exit wound, it means the bullet is lodged somewhere inside his body. God, I hate these types of

complicated cases.

I put my stethoscope on his chest to get clues on how he's faring. The heart sounds come through as regular, though their intensity is slightly diminished. The aortic second sound and pulmonic second sound are normal as well.

"We'll have to do an emergency exploratory thoracotomy," I say, which is a complicated way of saying that we'll have to cut open his chest to find out what's actually wrong with him and to extract the bullet. "Prepare an operating room and ask for an electrocardiogram and a portable x-ray machine. Fast."

The nurse gets to work while I wait around for the results from the ECG and x-ray while staff members wheel away Tony to the operating room. The anesthesiologist should put him to sleep soon and then I'll be able to start. There's hardly any time to formulate my plan of action.

I swallow a lump of spit as a cold and unsettling feeling threads through my blood. This is a high-risk surgery and I want to succeed so, so badly. I'll be a superstar if I can manage to save this one patient. No. I must save the patient. I must, because I have to be the best.

Only, my body hasn't gotten the memo of my ambitions and is refusing to cooperate with me. My hands have grown clammy with worry. Dread is spreading in my belly like poison, eating away the limited reserves of my self-confidence. My need to succeed is so deep, so desperate that my head feels like it's being crushed under all the pressure I'm putting on myself. Dammit. How am I going to hold a scalpel like this? How am I going to even walk to the operating room when every muscle in my body has frozen?

What if I mess up? What if all it takes to lose a lifetime of hard work is one moment of weakness? No. I can't afford this panic attack right now. This is my chance to prove myself. To prove my abilities. To show everyone that I'm the best.

I've played the part of the confident, self-assured surgeon for so long, I think I've forgotten that under the mask I present to the world, I'm still scared, insecure, and plagued by a permanent inferiority complex.

“Get it together, Mira,” I chant, over and over again, willing my stupid legs to move.

In my peripheral vision, the image of Lucien talking to a bald, intimidating man in a black suit—probably the patient’s family or surrogate—makes an unwelcome appearance, further worsening the hollow, terrifying feeling in the bottom of my stomach. Luci never freaks out before surgeries. He handles stress well—unlike me, who tends to fold in high-pressure situations. That’s why I hate emergencies.

“The ECG. And here’s the x-ray.” The nurse hands me the two items I requested earlier, giving me a look of pure hope and awe.

Shit. She doesn’t know I’m not the genius I pretend to be and I can’t let her find out. My mind goes blank for a second as I try to inhale. I can’t even focus on the images and charts in front of me.

I exhale, but my mind’s stuck in a swamp of fear. I have to pull it out somehow. I blink, trying to refocus, but oh my goodness, I think I’m about to throw up. I groan. This is so pathetic. I thought I was over this hyperventilating phase after residency. I’ve done well in my fellowship so far. Why are things suddenly getting worse at the very moment when I have an opportunity to shine?

I must shine. I must show everyone I’m competent. I must not look like an idiot—

“You have to move to the operating room on your own, you know. Nobody’s going to wheel you there like the patient.” Lucien’s snarky voice hits my ears. And for once, it’s soothing rather than irritating.

He’s looking down over my shoulder at what I’m holding in my trembling hands. I will my hands to stop shaking, but they don’t listen. Not one part of my body is listening to me today.

“Judging by the x-ray, the bullet shadow is right under the left lung. There’s also some damage to the surrounding areas,” Lucien surmises. I will never admit this out loud, but I’m glad

for his analysis because it makes my mind go to better place—like how I’m going to get into the chest cavity, how I’ll extract the bullet. For blissful moments, my mind stays there, allowing the tension in my body to melt away little by little.

“I can read an x-ray,” I mutter, finally finding the strength to start walking, when, all of a sudden, Lucien grabs my hand.

“Your fingers are shaking, Mira.”

Ugh. I was hoping he wouldn’t have noticed that. I snatch my hand away from his grasp, my retort ready on my tongue, but I lose the words when I see his face. His eyes are the softest, most delicate blue and the gentleness in his expression nearly knocks me backward. This can’t be the same arrogant, snob I know. It’s his face...but somehow not his face.

“It’s nothing for you to concern yourself with, Luci.” I clear my throat. As if my feelings weren’t already complicated enough, now I’m feeling warm, fuzzy things for Lucien. The good part is that they’ve overshadowed my crippling insecurity, so I can focus on the surgery now.

“You have good reason to be scared.” Lucien points at the man in the black suit I saw earlier. He’s pacing outside the operating room, mumbling something to himself. Up close, he looks even more dangerous. “These guys are actual mafia. He even has a gun.”

My gaze trails to the guy in the black suit. The menacing mafia hitman narrows his eyes at me, pushing back the flaps of his suit jacket and giving me a clear glimpse of his semiautomatic. He curves his hand around the holstered weapon in a warning.

“You’re serious,” I say.

But it’s the prospect of death by bullet wound that finally snaps me out of my funk. I draw a deep, determined breath and stride toward the operating room, determined—but not so much that I can ignore the 6-foot shadow spilling out behind me, its edges kissing my shoes.

“Stop following me or I’ll borrow Black Suit’s gun and shoot you,” I warn Lucien through gritted teeth.

“Wait. Listen. I’ve done this type of procedure before. I can help you.” Lucien grabs the x-ray from my hand and stabs its center. “It’s a penetrating wound of the heart and lung. There are probably some blood clots around this area.” His fingertip circles around the region above the bullet’s shadow. “He may become cyanotic before you get a chance to open him up. Two hands will be better than one. I can do a cardiac massage and restore the heartbeat.”

“Don’t need your help.” I snatch the x-ray from him and wave it at him like a woman sprinkling salt at an evil spirit. “If I remember correctly, your last one didn’t end so well.”

Lucien’s face shutters. I almost regret pointing out that piece of his past when I know he has been trying to forget about it. Frustration leaks in his tone when he says, “That was because the patient was brought in too late. It wasn’t my fault.”

He wrings his arms.

“I’ll manage,” I fire back.

“Mira, don’t be stubborn. You know there’s a higher chance of success if we do it together. Dr. Burns isn’t on call right now.”

I don’t deny it. It’s true. I feel kind of scared doing it all by myself since I have so little expertise in these types of procedures. Not that I’ll ever admit that aloud. The first requirement for becoming a cardiothoracic surgeon is confidence, though some, like Lucien, take it too far.

“Standard left anterior thoracotomy,” I say, relenting. “I’ll do it and you’ll watch. Don’t interfere unless something goes wrong.”

I’m sure it takes every ounce of humility Lucien possesses in his body to agree to this proposition. “Fine.”

“Truce in the operating room. Remember?” I remind him of our pact from long ago, the one we made when the director nearly expelled us from the program for our immature behavior. We have never broken that promise but that may be

because we have never performed a procedure in the same operating room after that. Dr. Burns makes sure of that.

“I would never gamble on a patient’s life...not even to win against you,” Lucien says.

Neither would I.

“Okay, then. Deal.”

For some inexplicable reason, we do a meaningless handshake, as if we’ve sealed a billion-dollar deal. I hate how I notice the warmth of his skin, the solid shape of his fingers, and the firmness of his touch. Our connected hands reassure me.

It’ll be fine.

Once we’re gloved and scrubbed and cozy in our surgical gowns, we do a timeout, which involves all the members present in the operating room to confirm the details of the procedure and check that all equipment is present. The oppressive silence in the room presses into me like a gun pointed at the back of my head. I briefly recall Black Suit who is waiting in the emergency department to murder me in case I fail.

My heart’s racing. This must be obvious because Lucien gently brushes his gloved fingers against mine. I can’t believe I’m being comforted by my arch-nemesis. Does that make me pathetic or what?

But once I begin working, all the fears and insecurities and thoughts of brutal mafia torture methods evaporate instantly. I pick up the scalpel to make the cut in the patient’s chest, then the residents suction off the blood. It’s a familiar song and dance for me, this part at least. I part the chest, holding it open with clamps.

“The blood pressure’s unobtainable,” the ER nurse mutters.

The reading on the monitor goes flat. Tony’s heart, now exposed, is at standstill.

“Initiate cardiac massage,” I call out and Lucien’s on it before the words are fully out of my mouth.

The next thirty seconds are charged with explosive tension, the patient’s life teetering between being gone or not. My stomach, empty because I skipped breakfast, trembles like a vibrator on the highest setting. Lucien’s focus never wavers from the patient. Just as I’m losing hope and readying myself to pronounce him dead, he succeeds in restoring the heartbeat.

“Done. You can continue now,” he says.

Breath floods my lungs. Relief stabilizes my trembling knees.

“Thanks,” I mutter.

A diabolical sparkle ignites in Luci’s eyes and I want nothing more than to rub it away.

I guess two sets of hands were better than one in the end.

FOUR

Lucien

MY SHIFT ENDS at 6 pm that evening. By then, Tony, the wounded mafia soldier, is resting in the ICU, recovering from his very close brush with death. The surgery was a success, though the recovery will take time. Tony isn't out of the woods yet.

Even Dr. Burns praised us for this one.

"I never imagined it'd be you two," he said over the phone. "Well done, I guess."

I'd ideally have liked to not share this achievement with Mira, but this is still one of the major accomplishments of my career. And *her* career, too.

Once I've changed out of my scrubs into my regular clothes, I pop by the ICU where Mira is already checking on Tony, but I can't go in now since I'm off work.

I pass Black Suit outside in the waiting area. I found out that his actual name is Joe Cullotta when I informed him that we'd managed to save his amico. Joe glowered at me. I admit, I may have told him that the chances of his friend surviving were next to none. But that was part of explaining the risks of the procedure so I could get his signature on the consent forms. I'm hoping he'll warm up to me as the days go by since his amico will be here for at least a week.

“Good night, Joe.” I wave at him but stay planted in the waiting area. I need to talk to Mira once she comes out of the ICU. Her shift should be ending soon and I have plans for celebrating our successful surgery.

I glance at my phone, hoping to kill time on Twitter, but then I spy a message in my inbox. Dread slithers across my body, but it’s not another one from my father. The sender is Tina.

March 14th.

She sends these creepy texts every once in a while, to remind me. I hooked up with her in May. That was a mistake. But back then, I didn’t realize how clingy she was so I slept with her a few times.

Then I realized she had an affair with my father, too. I tried to break things off but she cried and begged me to give her closure, so I agreed to meet her one final time on March 14th next year. It was just a random date that popped into my mind at the time. I thought she’d forget all about me in ten months. But I’m cursed with being both memorable and a fantastic lay. So she continues to pester me with these texts.

I never reply, though.

Don’t need to get any more involved with crazy Tina than I already am.

“Where are all the normal people in the world?” I direct my question at no one in particular, but Joe, who is standing next to me growls in reply.

No surprise there. You can tell from his menacing appearance alone that he’s the growling type.

I inch closer to him, stuffing my phone in my pocket, feeling too uncomfortable to look at it again because of the message. Maybe I should try conversing with Joe while I wait. His friend just got shot. He probably needs some emotional comfort. And I’m here to give it.

“Are your bosses pleased about Tony’s recovery?” I inquire.

Joe taps on his smartphone screen, completely blocking me out. I relax my shoulders. Well, Rome wasn't built in a day. Maybe he's the shy type.

"If you have any medical questions, feel free to ask me anytime," I say, extending him a metaphorical olive branch.

Radio silence.

Perhaps I should've gone for small talk. Joe doesn't look like he'd have medical questions, anyway. Gives the scars on his face and neck, he has probably been to enough hospitals to know how to perform a bullet extraction himself.

"I was watching this show on Netflix where the main character—who works in organized crime, mind you—goes to Tel Aviv to launder money. Does that actually happen?"

More silence.

I switch to something that doesn't require a response. "Do you plan to stay here all night? There's a twenty-four-hour diner across the street in case you get hungry. Their pancakes are very good."

I expect this attempt at initiating conversation to be drowned out, too, in favor of texting the underboss/don/his mistress/whoever Joe is texting so furiously. But Joe suddenly cants his head up, dark eyes studying me with new interest.

Then the unexpected happens. Rising to his feet, he corners me with the speed of a cheetah, arms stretched and hands planted on the wall in front of me until my body's caged between them, my back glued to the wall.

Okay, my life just got exciting. I'm aware of the fact that I'm incredibly attractive and desirable. But to have men aggressively dominate me in the ICU is another level of ego boost.

Joe's nose is a hair's breadth from mine. He exhales fast, angry plumes of air onto my face, his breaths laced with the smell of cigarette smoke. I don't know when he got the time to smoke in between praying for his amico's life, threatening the nurses, and texting his boss. He must be a great multitasker.

“Um...wow.” I thread my fingers through my hair, massaging my scalp. “I’m flattered that you’re so interested in getting up close and personal with me, but you need to get in line. There are already a lot of people waiting for their turn. Wouldn’t be fair if I gave you preferential treatment.”

Joe releases a grunt of disgust but doesn’t budge. He’s unpredictable if nothing else.

“I’ll say this once so listen carefully.” A dark warning simmers under his words. “It’s not a good idea to get on my bad side.”

“I was trying to get on your good side, actually,” I tell him, stretching my lips in a thin smile.

He recoils, looking like he’s about to throw up on my face. Ouch, that hurts. My smile isn’t that terrifying.

“Do me a favor and don’t try to get on my any side,” Joe spits out.

“Well, right now I’m in front of you and I can’t actually get to any side of you unless you let me, so...”

I mean, I could break his arm. Which I won’t do because I’m a doctor and my hands are for saving people, not hurting them. But theoretically speaking, it wouldn’t be that hard. I took aikido classes when I was young. Along with cello lessons, violin lessons, coding camp, tennis classes, French lessons, Mandarin lessons, and Italian lessons. My mother definitely wanted an overachiever kid.

Mira moves within the ICU and her eyes fix on Joe and me caught on our...well...dance of friendship? She scrabbles to the door immediately.

“What’s between you and that girl?” Joe asks, cocking his head in the direction of the ICU.

“Which girl? There are quite a few of them in the ICU,” I reply.

“The one you did the surgery with. You were arguing a lot outside the operating room. I almost thought you’d strangle each other.”

“Oh, her. We went to high school together. And college. And med school. And were residents at the same hospital, too.”

“So childhood friends.”

“Friends might be stretching it.”

Joe’s jaw works. The ICU doors open and Mira’s form materializes from the doorway. Her shoes slap against the white marble flooring. Joe pulls his arms back to his sides.

“No wonder you’re friends,” he mutters. “Birds of a feather flock together.”

“Dude. I just told you we weren’t friends—”

“Neither of you is normal.”

“Huh? What’s that supposed to mean?”

Joe doesn’t bother answering. He makes a dignified stroll back to his seat and gets back to texting with his mistress. Now I’m certain it’s his mistress because who gets angry enough to threaten death when their work is interrupted in favor of a nice chat? I must’ve interrupted something far more important.

Mira scurries to my side, her white coat swishing about her legs. Her hands flutter like butterflies against her jaw.

“Goodness, Luci, were you actually pushed against the wall by a hot mafia guy? That’s like my dream come true,” she says, eyes shimmering. What’s this? I’ve never seen her like this before. She’s all giggly and hyped up and checking Joe out. A flare of discomfort erupts in my stomach. I don’t think I like seeing her like this, though I can’t fathom why. She’s not even being competitive for once.

“Joe’s old enough to be your father,” I remark. And unless the definition of hot has changed drastically since yesterday... he’s not that, either.

But even knowing those facts doesn’t deter Mira from approaching him. Maybe I should’ve broken his arm after all. She’d think twice about hooking up with him, then.

Wait, what am I thinking? The direction of my thoughts catches me off-guard. I've never wanted to harm anyone before. Why did I feel that irrational burst of resentment? Toward a mafia solider of all people?

Why do I want to yell at him: "*I liked her first. I liked her when we were still in high school,*" like a pathetic fool? I mean, it's an ancient tale, Mira and me at sixteen. How she friend-zoned me and broke my heart. I've buried that hopeless, defeated part of myself. Replaced it with the confident, proud, shinier version of myself that will never be cowered by Mira or make the mistake of assuming she likes me. I mean, she just metaphorically slapped me in the face again this morning. Liking me is impossible for her. Wait, it's not like I'm trying to be liked...

I shake my head, wondering if the stress of a long day is getting to me.

Thankfully, I have no reason to worry. Joe is ignoring Mira as he ignored me.

"Come on, I'll buy you dinner. To celebrate the success of our joint surgery." I'm not entirely sure what possesses me to say this.

Mira blinks, startled, then straightens her scrubs.

When she glowers at me, the competitive gleam is back in her eyes. My entire body heaves a relieved sigh. Great.

"Shouldn't I be the one buying you dinner?" She arches one thin eyebrow. "Since *I* was the main surgeon and you were just an assistant?"

"But I have more money than you," I state. I'm not trying to compete with her on wealth, but it's just a fact. I know that her parents aren't rich, and since her father's death, her mother has been struggling financially. There's no need for her to spend money on unnecessary things when she needs to save.

"We get paid the same salary by the university," Mira says.

"I have a trust fund," I argue.

"I have savings."

“Do they total thirty million?”

“Depends on what currency you’re asking about. I may have thirty million Iranian rials, maybe.”

“Not good enough for my palette. I’m used to the best.”

She clicks her tongue. “What a snob.”

“On the bright side, you get to eat like a proper human being for one day.”

Mira’s lips form an O, but the protest never escapes her mouth. She’s well aware of her unhealthy diet, which consists entirely of donuts, fast food, frozen meals, and coffee.

She bares a hint of her teeth, pushing her nose up in the air. “I’m going to reduce you to poverty, Luci. Just you wait.”

“Try your best.”

I decide hanging around Joe right now may not be the safest move since I’m not feeling particularly charitable toward him, so I wait at the hospital’s entrance while Mira changes back into her everyday clothes and finishes her rounds. She’s on-call so she might be asked to come back in the middle of our dinner, meaning I can’t take her too far away from the medical center. A shame. A lot of the good restaurants are pretty far from here, but there’s one right around here that might be able to squeeze us in.

I make a quick call. It’s to my favorite person in the entire world. Well, second-favorite. My favorite’s Uncle Henry.

She’s one of the busiest people alive, but she picks up my call.

“Hello Max,” I drawl. “Busy admiring your Oscars?”

“Good evening, Lucien,” she replies with just as much charming sarcasm. “I wasn’t expecting you to call.”

“I need a favor from you.”

Her breath catches. “What kind of favor?”

“Can you get me a table at a restaurant? It’s one of yours.”

“Date?” she asks, before answering her own question. “No. That can’t be. This is you we’re talking about. You’d have repelled every girl in the vicinity with your obnoxiousness by now.”

“Ouch. Max, that’s mean.” I exhale into the phone, wounded. “What did I ever do to you?”

Her light, airy laugh unfurls in my ears like rose petals. I love that sound because it reminds me of all the good times I had when I was young. Max used to babysit me when I was nine, back before she caught her big break as a movie star. That’s when she fell in love with Uncle Henry. It was a classic case of opposites attract. He was a total intellectual and she was a total airhead. Also, she was gorgeous, while he looked like your textbook nerd. Yet, somehow, they have been happily married for the last twenty-five years. I’ve never seen them fight or play mind games like my parents. Shockingly, they still love each other.

“Hmmm...let’s see. How about that time when you blackmailed me into taking you to Coney Island after lying to me about Henry’s curtains?” Max says.

“It was your fault for ruining them,” I mutter. “Your head was in the clouds.”

I chuckle, recalling that incident. Max actually poured bleach instead of detergent into the washing machine because she was too busy ‘rehearsing’ her Oscars speech. She was a total daydreamer back in the day. She still is. It’s simply that her dreams have come true.

“Oh,” she continues. “And how about that time when you made me buy you ice cream for which I almost lost my job?”

Admittedly, when I was young, I used to get a kick out of making Max’s life difficult. It was my favorite hobby. I met her at the time when my parents were going through divorce proceedings. I was frustrated with my life and felt like no one cared about me, so I wanted to make everyone miserable.

One thing I’m sure of, though, is that meeting Max and spending more time with Uncle Henry is the best thing that

ever happened to me. Their association has made me a better human being in every way. I love them more than I love my own parents.

“You sure hold a grudge,” I tell Max. “That happened decades ago.”

“So, which place do you want a table at?” Max gets back to the topic, right as I spot Mira’s silhouette out of the corner of my eye.

“I’ll text you the name and address,” I tell Max. “I’m heading there right now.”

FIVE

Mira

Okay, I did not think Lucien was serious about dining at a fine restaurant, especially after I threatened to bankrupt him. We've eaten together a couple of times when we were residents, but they were at eateries around the hospital. Pret. Au Bon Pain. Chipotle. Five guys.

Not a fucking Michelin star restaurant.

Well, I'm not sure this one's actually got a Michelin star, but if the ornate raindrop crystal chandelier hanging down from the ceiling is any indication, this isn't your average Burger King, either. It's not even one of those nice Indian restaurants with white tablecloths and Bollywood music reverberating through the air that I visit when I miss my mother's home cooking. And I used to think they were posh.

Sometimes, I forget just how filthy rich Luci's family is. Tonight would have to be one of those times.

The Uber ride we took dropped us off in front of a glass-double-door-fronted building with one of those old stone facades. Fake green plants pour down in a profusion from the golden pots hanging above the entrance. It screams Golden Age classiness right from the get-go.

I pull at the sleeve of my t-shirt, swallowing my nerves. There are threads coming off at the seams of my shirt. I'm not sure I meet the dress code of this establishment. A scary thought flits through my mind: What if all the other people

stare at me because I don't fit the 'standard' of a place like this? What if Lucien brought me here just to humiliate me? I wouldn't put anything past him since he lost today.

Shit. I stagger back in panic. Maybe I should run while I have the chance. Even if it means I'll have to eat frozen lasagna for dinner again.

"Don't look so awed, Mira. It's just a restaurant." Lucien's smile pushes his cheeks up. It makes him look like a mashed potato. But cute. And devious. That's a combination only he can pull off. "Or are you blown away by how handsome my side profile looks against the night sky?"

"The world doesn't revolve around you." I trace the outline of my brow, which is moist with sweat. "And your side profile isn't going to get us in without a reservation."

"You may be surprised."

"Making inflated claims is one thing, but I'd like to see some actual proof."

I'm afraid he's trying to show off without thinking this through. Being thrown out of a posh establishment like this is the last thing I want after the day I had with the mafia today.

Lucien covers my hand, closing his fingers around mine as he tugs me toward the restaurant. My entire body stiffens in anticipation for the words I'm sure are inevitably coming from the hostess 'Sorry, we're full. We can't take you without a reservation.'

"I have connections. Getting a table won't be a problem," Lucien says right as the smell of expensive wine and food makes me drool.

Warm air prickles my skin. At least the heating's nice. Hushed voices and the clink of plates and spoons wrap around me like an unfamiliar music track. I bob my head left and right, worry gnawing at me.

"I doubt your connections can help you at such short notice," I say as we approach the inevitable moment of rejection.

Lucien snorts. “My aunt owns this place.”

Of course she does. Who am I dealing with here? Despite his incredible egotism and arrogance, I have yet to see Lucien fall flat on his face.

“Your aunt who is a Hollywood legend?” I ask.

“The one and only Maxima Anderson.”

How was I supposed to know that?

“You could’ve told me earlier.” I wipe my nose, the worry in my blood cooling.

“And miss your terrified expression?” He rotates his head. “Not for the world.”

When he turns around, his trademark evil smirk sits on his lips like an imprinted mark and for the millionth time in my life, I’d willingly trade an arm and a leg for the sheer pleasure of erasing that smirk.

The vivid, punchy notes of jazz music float over our heads like smoke. I briefly raise my eyes and meet those of the hostess who is typing something on a laptop at the hostess stand. She’s wearing a white shirt, and the moment she notices me approach, she dons a polite smile.

“Hello, how may I help you?”

Her attention flickers to Lucien. She squints like she’s trying to place him. When she asks for what name he reserved under, he shakes his head.

“We’re with her.” Lucien points to a lonely, bespectacled, curly-haired girl reading a book alone at a corner table. My heart goes out to her. Poor unsuspecting thing. I’m not sure what plot Lucien is hatching but she seems to have been inadvertently caught in it. She’s completely oblivious to the fact, turning the pages of her book with a single-minded focus. I have to wonder what book she’s reading. And who she is.

“Do you know her?” I ask as we wend our way past smartly dressed patrons to the corner table.

“She’s my cousin, Ella. Max’s daughter,” Lucien informs. “My uncle and aunt have been very careful to shield her from the tabloids and paparazzi so she can live a normal life. She’s a sophomore at NYU.”

“Can’t believe she’s related to you.” I pause, sharpening my voice. “She looks so smart.”

“Excuse me. I’m smart. I’m a cardiothoracic fellow.”

“Oh, and what was it you said to Joe today? *Doesn’t take much to have a title these days.*”

Lucien sniffs, sulking. My chest swells with pride. I got him this time. The tiny victory makes adrenaline course through my veins. I never get this excited about anything except beating Luci.

In a perverse way, I find this game with him fulfilling. Because no matter how hard I work, how much I achieve, my mother won’t acknowledge it. Sometimes, I even begin to wonder if I’m a failure. If I’ve done enough. If I have what it takes to succeed. Keeping score with Lucien means my achievements are real. It means they count for something because I beat him. It means that Lucien sees my accomplishments and my hard work. He remembers my little victories, even if it’s only because they were his losses.

Ella is so absorbed in her book that even when we come to sit opposite her, she doesn’t react. I sip water from a glass while taking in her 60s style black midi skirt and a vintage floral top. Her fashion is quirky but seems to fit her so well, even though I don’t know what her personality is like.

“Ella, you wound me.” Lucien places a hand on his chest like he has been stabbed. “Your hotshot heart surgeon cousin has graced you with his presence and you’d pick...” Lucien lifts the book to read its cover. It says *The Crown of Thorns*. “A fantasy novel over me?”

I click my tongue at the overly dramatic gesture. Ella lifts her head, then jerks her neck like a deer caught in headlights. She blinks at the two people before her, totally confused, as if she expected to find someone else.

“Lu...ci...en?” The words come haltingly.

“Yes, that would be my name.” Luci pricks his finger pads with the fork, sounding sour. “Overjoyed you still remember.”

“And...you are?” She closes the book she’s reading. Her gray-green eyes, framed by thick lashes home in on me.

“I’m Mira. His colleague,” I reply.

Interest flickers in Ella’s eyes. Though her strange perm (which she definitely got done because there’s no way that’s natural), unfashionable glasses, and lack of makeup make her seem plain at first glance, I can tell that Ella inherited all her Mom’s good looks because her skin is flawless, her eyes are clear like crystal, and her features are all chiseled and beautiful. With the right presentation, she could be as stunning as any actress. But I gotta appreciate the way in which she is expressing herself without caring about conventional notions of beauty. Not many girls her age would be able to do that.

“Oh.” Ella pushes a lock of unruly hair behind her left ear. “Nice to meet you. I’m Ella. I’m a sophomore at NYU.”

“And in case you couldn’t guess,” Lucien interjects. “She’s majoring in literature.”

I lean back into the velvet upholstered chair, which is so comfortable that it feels like I’m being hugged by velvet. “Nice to meet you, too. I’m glad I don’t have to dine alone with your insufferable, egomaniac cousin.”

“Lucien, what did you do to her?” Ella frowns at her cousin.

Luci puts his arms up in surrender. “Nothing.”

Her brows knit together. “Then why would she hate you?”

“I don’t hate him,” I clarify. “I’m just not excited about his presence in my life.”

“For the record, I have never hated you and I’m pretty excited about your existence in my life.” Lucien puts down the fork he has been playing with. He twists his shoulder and rotates his head toward me. “But maybe that’s because I’m not the one who is always losing?”

“I don’t always lose,” I protest. “In fact, I won today. I saved a patient from dying.”

“With *my* help.”

I fume inwardly. I can’t deny it and that makes me madder than anything else. I never imagined there would come a day when Luci and I work together to save someone instead of tearing each other down. The worst part is that when I think about what happened during the surgery, I feel grateful, not like I want to tear his eyes out. He was a pretty stabilizing influence on my emotions during the procedure since I was a nervous wreck at the start. Then again, Luci has always been good at both riling people up and calming them down.

No, no, no. I cannot afford to start admiring Luci. That would be the death of me.

The sharp ping of an incoming text pulls me back to the present. I instantly pluck my phone from my puffer jacket, but there are no new messages. Across the table, Ella is checking her phone and worrying her lip.

“We have the same ringtone,” I tell her. “What a coincidence.”

Ella nods absently. She stuffs the book inside her bag and shoots to her feet, looking panicked. “It was great seeing you, Mira, but now I have to go.”

“Who was that?” Lucien asks.

A pink flush blooms on Ella’s pale cheeks. “A...friend.”

I’m no expert at reading people, but even I can tell that she’s lying. She’s terrible at it. She must not do it very often.

Lucien’s eyebrows climb into high inverted Us. “Since when do you have friends that are not words printed on paper?”

“It’s a new friend,” Ella snaps. “And no, I’m not telling you his name.”

“Him? A guy?” Suspicion thickens Lucien’s voice. “And he wants to meet you at this time of the evening?”

Ella holds her bag against her chest like it's a shield. Her face is red as a tomato by now. Poor thing. "It's not like that. We...have an...assignment to submit."

"Aren't people supposed to do their assignments on their own?" Lucien shakes his head and it reminds me of my mother's disapproving headshakes. My heart clenches in sympathy for Ella. "He's just using you for your brains. Be careful, Ella."

"I can take care of myself," Ella yells.

She storms away, her dark curls shaking wildly with every step.

I turn to Lucien when she's gone. "You just have to get on everybody's nerves, don't you?"

"What, you didn't think there was anything fishy about it?"

I admit; it did seem a little off. Ella was in such a hurry, too. But that could be because her friend is in some kind of trouble and she didn't want to tell us about it. I'm just a stranger. She probably doesn't trust me.

My stomach emits a loud, embarrassing growl and I reach for the breadbasket.

"Eat proper food," Lucien chides.

"Thanks for the advice, *Dad*."

I flip the pages of the menu while chewing on breadsticks that taste nothing like the breadsticks I've eaten before. A hint of truffle and so chewy.

Everything on the menu is eye-wateringly expensive, so I take the opportunity to order all the vegetarian items on the list, about ten dishes in total. Plus, the most expensive bottle of Merlot. Not like I'm going to be paying. I return the menu to the waitress with a satisfied smile.

"I'm feeling ravenous tonight," I tell Lucien. "I'm sooo grateful you brought me to this place."

He sighs and orders just a main course. Serves him right for showing off his family's wealth.

When the waitress has finally departed, I slide over to the seat that Ella just vacated, which is right opposite Lucien's. I need a front view of the expression on Luci's face when they hand him the check.

Propping an elbow on the table, I rest my chin on my open palm. "So. You had a hot moment with Black Suit back in the ICU. Want to tell me about it?"

"Why? Jealous that I'm getting more action with guys than you do in a typical year?"

"Please." I drop my shoulders. "What would you know about the action I'm getting?"

"Everything, since we work at the same place and live next to each other."

"So now you're stalking me?"

"I don't have to stalk you to know that your love life is a wasteland."

"But it won't be for long," I say, as the sommelier brings out expensive wine and pours it into my glass. I inhale the scent while holding the wineglass by its stem and rotating my wrist like I'm some rich character in a daytime soap who does this sort of thing on a daily basis.

Lucien's spine goes ramrod straight and his eyes widen. Look at him acting all shocked at the prospect of losing to me in love. He's such a type A. "What do you mean 'it won't be for long'?"

"I believe I have the seduction skills to convince Black Suit. Give me a week and we'll see who wins in this love triangle. You or me." I take a big swig of wine and feel it go straight to my head. Shit. I'm a terrible drunk. And I shouldn't even be drinking while I'm on call and can be summoned back to the hospital at any time. I just ordered the wine to piss Luci off.

I set my glass down and wipe my lips.

“Not everything’s a competition, Mira.” Lucien sounds irritated. It’s a delight to get on his nerves. To give him a taste of his own medicine. He’s drinking even faster than me. Lucky him. He doesn’t have to watch his alcohol intake. “And didn’t I tell you Joe’s too old for you?”

“Get with the times.” I twirl a strand of my black hair. “Age gap isn’t an issue nowadays.”

I’m not at all serious about this, since I doubt Black Suit and I have anything in common save for the desire to murder Lucien. Still. People have fallen in love over less.

“Don’t be so desperate to win, Mira. Joe’s a criminal.”

“And love is blind.”

“It seems so is your lust for victory,” Lucien says, his voice suddenly very quiet.

I must’ve lost my inhibitions after drinking expensive wine because I never imagined Lucien and I would be having a heart-to-heart about my nonexistent love life. It’s the one thing I know I can never win against him on. I can’t just sleep with guys so easily, given how badly that turned out for me the one time I did it.

“Whaddya know?” I say. “You were born with a silver spoon. You’ve never had to win at anything since you won the birth lottery.”

“Sounds like you’re jealous of me.” He swirls his wine glass. The crimson color reflected against his eyes makes him look very much like the devil he is. High cheekbones, red eyes, black hair. All he’s missing are two horns.

A bitter, hot emotion scissoring across my chest. Sitting so comfortably in this classy restaurant, looking like Satan, he seems more unattainable than ever.

“Sometimes, I wish I could be you,” I whisper, knotting my fingers into fists, and holding them in my lap.

Luci tips his chin upward. “Everybody wishes they could be me.”

“Must be nice, having everything.”

“I don’t have everything.”

“You do.” An ache swells in my throat. “Even if you’re too blind to realize. You have no idea how lucky you are.”

People think Luci’s smart the moment they lay eyes on him. Women want him. Other doctors respect him. His parents believe in him. He doesn’t have to prove anything to anyone. Or struggle against impossible odds. Or fight a losing battle every day. He doesn’t have to ever wonder if he’ll end up with nothing. I’m so jealous.

“I admit I’m lucky, but everybody’s lucky in their own way.” Lucien replies. “I think you see what you want to see.”

“I think you’re the one who sees what you want to see.” I sweep my hand across the table to make my point and end up knocking Lucien’s glass of wine to the floor. The crash of glass shattering spikes in the air, turning all eyes toward us.

Humiliation crawls up my body as a waiter appears to mop up the spill and sweep away the pieces of glass. My very first time at a Michelin star restaurant, and I’ve just proved to everyone that I don’t belong here. That I’m an outsider. My lips tremble, but I fight the anger. There’s no point in being angry at myself.

“I’m really sorry. I’ll pay for this,” I tell both the waiter and Lucien. “I’m sorry. I wasn’t looking—”

“Don’t panic over something as inconsequential as a broken glass,” Lucien replies, waving away my concern with a flapping of his hand. “These things happen.”

I blink. What in the world? Why is Lucien being so nice to me? I can think of ten digs he could take at me for being clumsy enough to knock his glass of wine. Not to mention half the Merlot spilled on his pants and he must be in extreme discomfort right now. I guiltily look down at his leg. A red stain has bloomed on his light gray socks and his leather oxfords are soaked in wine.

Lucien rolls up the leg of his pants, grabbing his napkin to wipe his wet leg. I seize my napkin, too, to try and help him.

It's just reflex—the need to clean up the mess I made. I'm not thinking at this moment.

But my fingers still as I grow aware of Lucien's exposed skin. And the long scar that runs along the length of his leg. It's a faded brown stripe, probably old, but still visible. You could probably see it even from a distance.

“What's this scar?” I trace my fingertip along its curvature. “It's pretty big.”

Lucien draws his leg back suddenly like I've scalded his skin. He quickly dabs at the pink, wet spot on his knee before rolling down the hem of his pant, erasing the scar from my view. “It's nothing.”

It's not nothing, given how shifty he's acting. He fidgets with the napkin, reaching for the empty glass, then when his fingers close over nothing, he remembers it's gone.

“How did you get it?” I probe, widening my eyes and leaning closer to him. “Accident?”

“Is that important?” Lucien asks.

“Come on. You can tell me. We're both doctors.”

“Don't feel like it.”

“It must be a big secret, if you're protecting it so vehemently. Let me guess...” I rub my thumb over my chin. “You had an accident when you were younger?”

“Believe whatever you want to believe.”

The waiter who cleaned up the mess earlier returns with a new glass just in time, and pours him wine with a smile. God, these people are such professionals. His smile puts me at ease, dissolving some of my guilt and insecurity.

It also maybe puts me too much at ease, where my mind quickly jumps on a new idea.

“Luci, why don't we play a game? How about truth or dare?”

“I'll pass.”

“When you can get me to dance naked in this restaurant and embarrass myself?” *Take the bait, Luci*, I think to myself. I’m offering you the chance to humiliate me.

“I’m not in the mood for games. And you’ve already embarrassed yourself enough for one day.” His baritone is darker than usual. I notice how his fists are clenched, and how many times he has looked at the scarred leg now. Fifteen.

He’s definitely stressed. What happened? His downbeat expression suggests something...not good. And it makes my usually nonexistent maternal instinct rear its head. I want to comfort him...for what, I can’t say. He just looks like he really needs it. The bone-deep urge to find out what’s troubling him takes root in my body. His lonely form is a thorn in my vision and all I want to do is restore him to his usual self—even if his usual self is a cocky asshole.

“I’m sorry I broke the glass,” I press my hand to my throat, sliding it down the column slowly. I read somewhere that men read this as a sign of distress and it triggers their protective instinct or some such rubbish. “But I’m trying to smooth things over so can you stop acting so stiff. You’re making me feel worse. Let’s just do something fun and lift the mood, okay?”

A flicker of consternation. The thing about obsessing over someone for a decade is that you kinda become aware of their hidden insecurities. Lucien is insecure about his ability to read people because at college, he was told off by the professor for ruining the atmosphere in class again and again. “Learn to read the mood,” our professor said to him.

“Fine.” Resistance worn, he places his hands on the table.

I dig out a shiny new quarter from my purse. “Let’s flip this coin. Heads I win, tails you win.”

“Whatever.”

I’m no expert at cheating in games of chance, but I do my best to tip the odds in my favor. And it lands on heads.

“Truth or dare?” I ask.

Lucien scrunches his nose. Mulls over it for a moment before answering, “Truth. Dare sounds like too much work.”

Got him. I angle my nose downward. “How did you get the scar?”

“Fuck,” he curses, his eyes widening. “I fell into your trap.”

I can’t smother my victorious grin. Am I a master manipulator or what?

“Don’t even think about lying or evading.” Fold my hands against my chest, I relax into the chair. “I’ll know.”

Lucien gives up with a huge sigh. “When I was thirteen, I was trying to climb down a scaffolding. My foot slipped, I fell, and got injured.”

“Wait, what were you doing trying to climb a scaffolding? Don’t tell me you were...running away from home?”

I know Lucien is originally from New York City and I once overheard him telling a resident that his parents live in a townhouse close to Central Park which was where he grew up before he was packed off to boarding school in middle of nowhere New Jersey (aka my hometown) at the age of fourteen. That’s where we first met.

Luci looks at his leg, his cheeks pinker than they ought to be after half a glass of wine. Is he blushing? “You wanted the truth, you got the truth. I’m not giving you details.”

“But that’s not fair! It’s an incomplete answer.”

“Too bad. Move on.”

“Please,” I mouth, trying to look as sincere as I can. I’ve never shown any vulnerability to Luci before, but right now my desperation is definitely making me feel exposed.

“If I tell you about that, you need to tell me one of your secrets in return. To keep things fair.”

“It’s that level of information?” I gasp. “Now I simply must know about it.”

“You go first.” Lucien points one finger at me. “I don’t trust you not to backtrack on your promise.”

I breathe. “Not fair. I asked you first.”

“Those are my conditions.” I sense the shift in his tone, from arrogant and playful to dead serious with an undercurrent of warning. He’s expecting me to drop the subject. He doesn’t think I’ll give up my secrets for his.

I slip my feet out of my ballet flats, tapping my feet restlessly against the floor. I could back away. Let my idle curiosity remain idle curiosity. Move onto the next topic. But my heart is fixated on this. I want to know more about Lucien.

My brain flashes back to a memory of the time when we were residents, to the day I saw Lucien crying in an empty, dark corner after he made a mistake and cut an artery while performing surgery. The attending surgeon salvaged the situation, but it could’ve led to dangerous complications for the patient otherwise and I could tell Lucien was pretty shaken by the prospect. He has high standards for himself, just like I do, and when you play with lives, every mistake could become a lawsuit, a disgrace, a warning to quit. That’s the only time I’ve ever seen Luci’s confidence completely crushed, his inhuman ego give way to remorse and guilt and tears of powerlessness. And I want to see him like that again. Not crying, obviously. But showing the side of him that’s not perfect. The part of him makes mistakes and feels guilt. Because that part of him is sympathetic unlike his \$4500 sneaker-wearing, self-glorifying regular self.

“Alright.” The words are too firm for me to backpedal though I uttered them out of impulse.

If I tell Lucien about my secret, it’d leave me feeling naked. But maybe that’s what he thinks, too, which is why he set up this bargain. Still, I want to know the person under the cocky, egotistical mask. I won’t tell him anything too big...

“After my father died, I was totally depressed,” I say. My father passed away when I was a third-year resident. “I was left alone with my mother, whom I don’t get along with. It was

a huge blow to my...emotional state. I'm really grateful for your help at that time."

At that time, he took a lot of my shifts because there was no one else I could ask. I've never been the type who could make friends easily. Luci and I may be rivals, but when push comes to shove, I know he'll help me. He's pretty reliable like that.

"Yeah, I could tell you were depressed. The whole hospital could. That's not a secret." Lucien extends his hand and rearranges the fork and knife in front of him. "And you're welcome."

I see his throat bob as he swallows. The air between us turns pliant, the atmosphere intimate. For a moment, the fortress that we've built to keep the other out falls.

"I had a cello recital that day. My mother forced me to take cello lessons and I was terrible at it. I didn't want to go and embarrass myself in front of the audience, so I tried to run away right before we had to leave for the recital. In the most ridiculous manner ever—by jumping out of my bedroom window. Yeah, I was rebellious and stupid." He messes up his hair, his skin turning redder. "And then I fell and injured myself."

"You could've just pretended to be sick," I offer.

Lucien releases a bitter, hollow laugh. "You don't know my mother, Mira. She wouldn't let me off with an excuse like that. She'd give gotten angry and dragged me to the recital hall. And then my parents would've started fighting and threatening to divorce and it'd be my fault again...well. I was tired of being controlled by them."

A twinge of sympathy registers in my chest for him. He must've been at his rope's end. I can almost understand. My parents had a harmonious relationship, but my mother was always disappointed in me, no matter what I did. I know how that feels. How much that hurts.

"But you still ran away? That's bold," I say.

Lucien wipes a hand across his forehead—his forehead that’s suddenly shiny with sweat. A frisson or nervousness slides down my body. Oh god, I’m afraid of what comes next.

He meets my gaze for the first time in what feels like the entire evening, and his pupils are big, the shadows in his eyes darker than I’ve even seen them before. “You had better not breathe this to another soul...but I didn’t run away that day. I tell everyone that’s what I did, but that’s not what I did.”

I don’t interject, letting my silence become an invitation for Lucien to elaborate. He looks like he wanted to say more even if this subject has suddenly turned heavy all of a sudden.

“If I ran away, I knew it’d make everything worse later and my parents would just be disappointed in me and start fighting. But if I got hurt, they couldn’t do anything. They’d feel bad for me. They’d notice that I was unhappy, and then, maybe, I could quit cello...”

“You were engaging in self-harm at age thirteen?” My mouth hangs open. “That’s disturbing.”

“It’s not...I wasn’t...” He slaps a hand over his face, which is flushed red. Oh my god, Lucien’s actually embarrassed about this. Instead of being elated about having fished out his mortifying secret, I feel bad for him. Because I can tell this isn’t something to joke about. Not for him. His face is twisted in an expression of agony. “It’s not self-harm. I was just rebelling. I was thirteen, what did I even know? I just needed a way out of my problems. I was immature.”

“Were your parents *that* strict?” I curve my fingers around the base of the empty porcelain plate.

Lucien’s parents are world-famous surgeons. His father was the director at the hospital where we completed our residency and his mother is a cardiac surgeon. I always thought his parents got along. They smile in their photos together.

Another dark laugh bubbles out of Luci’s throat. “You can’t even imagine what they’re really like. It was like living in a prison every day. I had to act like an adult even though I

was a kid. My diet was strictly controlled and I couldn't eat anything I liked. I was expected to excel at everything—academics, music, languages, sports. Honestly, I was overjoyed when my mother threw in the towel and packed me off to boarding school at fourteen.”

My eyes reach over the table to Lucien's leg. To the scarred spot now covered by his pants.

“It must've hurt like hell when you got hurt,” I say. “The scar looks pretty deep.”

Lucien's voice is harsh when he responds. Harsh and tight. “At that time, it felt like relief, not like pain.”

That statement, so loaded with hidden depths, hangs in the air. A stiff, awkward silence snaps into place between us. I fist my fingers in my lap, under the table. A rush of emotion wells up in my chest, but I tamp it down because even though I'm heartbroken for Lucien's younger self, there's absolutely no way I can squeeze his hand or whisper anything comforting to him right now. We simply don't have that kind of relationship. I wish we did, now more than ever. That we were at least friendly as colleagues. But we aren't.

Lucien dissolves the uncomfortable silence with the clank of the wineglass against the plate.

“You know Mira, you look really pretty when you're quiet. I'd say you're almost tolerable.” He smirks, but his smile is lacking its usual bite. His eyes are dark and sad. He only said that to put me at ease, to restore the dynamic between us to what it has always been. Otherwise the rest of this dinner is going to be super uncomfortable for the both of us.

I now understand what he said earlier. That sometimes, things that are supposed to hurt can feel like freedom. Being mean to each other feels like relief, too. Especially given that the alternative would be vulnerability, which is inevitably going to lead to heartbreak for me because Lucien's a playboy who could never take relationships seriously.

“Well, I'd say the same for you, Luci,” I retort. “If you never spoke, you'd be a whole lot more tolerable.”

My voice lacks its usual venom, too. And from the way Lucien looks away, I know he notices it, too. He probably doesn't know how to react to this nicer version of me. Just like I don't know how to react to the sympathetic, burdened-with-expectations version of him.

I never thought Luci would have had such a tragic youth. He looks like he has had a charmed life all along. Or maybe that's what I want to believe because otherwise I'll have to admit that I've been biased toward him because of his wealthy background. That I assumed he hadn't suffered at all because his suffering was invisible while my parents' poverty and struggles are out there for the world to see.

"Tell me something," I venture. "Is the scar why you always keep your legs covered, even when you go running in the middle of summer?"

Lucien shifts in his chair, looking like he wants to disappear. For an egoistic guy like him who is perpetually preserving his cold genius image, having his vulnerability exposed must feel like death.

"It's embarrassing." He rubs his eyebrows, keeping his gaze firmly on the tablecloth. "People always ask about it when they see it. And I don't know what to say."

"Because the truth's so dark?"

A slow nod.

This is the most we've ever opened up to each other in years. Maybe it's how he seems so bare in front of me right now. I feel like I have to give up something of mine, too.

"I'm sorry." The words are like nails dragging through my windpipe.

Lucien coughs. "For what?"

"For whatever you went through." *You don't have to suffer alone.* The words are there at the tip of my tongue but my pager rings at the worst time possible. I dig it out from my handbag and expel a frustrated groan when I read the message.

Patient requiring emergency surgery.

Great. My one opportunity at a Michelin star meal is now gone. And our one opportunity at...whatever it was that we were doing...is gone too. Why am I more disappointed at the later?

“I’m needed.” I sulk. “Thanks for the dinner.”

“The dinner that you didn’t eat?”

“But you gotta pay for it. Bye, Luci.”

I dash out of the restaurant. My only regret is that I didn’t get to watch Lucien as his eyeballs popped out at the amount on the check.

SIX

Lucien

“You’ve been looking at the time a lot,” Amir observes the following afternoon. We’re both in the fellow room, which consists of our desks and computers and a bed to use when on-call or tired. We share it with each other. There’s another one like this that Mira and Amanda share.

I’m staring at a research paper I’m supposed to write, eyes glazing over the letters because my mind is occupied with something else.

Mira didn’t come out for her morning run today. That probably means she spent the night here. After eating dinner alone at the restaurant yesterday, I still can’t forget her words. Or her expression.

Sometimes, I wish I could be you.

Because when she said it, it didn’t seem like she wanted to be me. It seemed like she was tired of being herself. Which is a pretty big admittance from someone who has as much pride as Mira does. I’d say the woman is made up of 99% pride and 1% spite. Still, I feel bad for her. I know she’s still struggling to pay off her debts, and a million other things. Judging by the way her fingers trembled before Tony’s surgery, it’s obvious that the pressure to be perfect still gets to her, like it did back in residency.

“Is there any way I can freeze time?” I ask.

“If you’re going to freeze time, wait until you’re at least finished with your procedure,” Amir says.

I fire another groan at the computer monitor, recalling that I have a surgery scheduled in twenty minutes. Shifting to my feet with a heavy sigh, I make my way to the restroom. Mira is on-call so our paths cross in the hallway.

She almost misses me, which is a sure sign that she’s exhausted. Usually, she’d arrow straight to me and taunt me over minor details, like how she successfully managed a cardiac tamponade case that came in overnight on zero sleep.

As she whisks past me in her scrubs, I absorb her red-veined eyes, and chapped lips, and can’t resist wanting to reach out to ask her if she’s alright. But she’ll bristle at such a question from me and brush me off with ‘Why do you care?’. Sometimes, it’s impossible dealing with her. Why does she always treat me like I’m her mortal enemy?

But despite the possibility of being snubbed, I can’t bury the concern that’s spreading throughout my chest like a rash.

So I say hello in the only way she finds acceptable.

“Surprised to see you’re still here today.” I sneer.

Mira swivels, eyebrows drawn together in confusion. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Dunno; I thought after sucking me dry yesterday you’d have realized that your true calling is being a gold digger and moved onto some other target.”

I’m usually not this mean, but she looks so out of it that I’ll need something strong to get her riled up. I need to see her react to affirm that she’s still okay. It’s not like she’ll flat out tell me or anything—our relationship has never worked that way.

Mira doesn’t even flinch, though. She folds her hand under her breasts and clicks her tongue, pity swimming in her eyes. “You must be poorer than you let on if you call that paltry sum gold-digging. It wasn’t even a Chanel bag or Gucci Coat.”

It's as though yesterday didn't even happen. Even though the memory of her words is still fresh in my mind. Freshly digging into my heart. I thought things were going to change. Why did I think that? Frustration heats my body. When have things ever changed between us?

Guess we'll be writing that conversation off as a drunken mistake, then.

I blink slowly at her statement, letting her fully appreciate my horror. "I pity the muppet who becomes your boyfriend. You'll reduce him to poverty."

"I'll be careful to pick someone who has more money than you." Mira sticks her chin in the air. "Someone who can afford my tastes."

"You even think like a gold digger. You should switch careers already."

"Why? Are you feeling insecure about losing to me?"

"Don't be childish." I take a step closer. She smells of antiseptic. And for some inexplicable reason, I find that scent comforting. "We both know I'm God's gift to medicine."

"Keep telling yourself that." She jerks forward like she just heard something ludicrous. "All you have is overconfidence. You can't deceive people with that forever."

Her words stick in my chest like a thorn. I feel exposed all of a sudden, the same way I did last night. Like she has seen into the heart of me, to the insecure teenager I used to be. To the part of me that is still that.

"Baseless confidence isn't all I have," I protest, hands falling to my sides, tension curling my fingers into tight fists. "Everything I've achieved, I got through elbow grease. Just because I was born with more doesn't mean I worked less than you or anyone else to get here."

I'd usually have responded to Mira's insinuations with a bigger display of privilege to annoy her. I'd have said something like 'Don't forget about my hotness' or 'my grandfather was a multi-millionaire'. That's who I should be.

But sometimes, I get tired of being what everyone wants me to be. I get tired of people denying my efforts.

Mira, to my surprise, curves her mouth upward. She looks quite pleased with my answer. That would be a first. “Luci, look at you throwing away a perfectly good opportunity to boast about your sex appeal and Amex cards. Did you pick up a new religion between last night and today?”

“Not unless honesty is a religion.”

She claps her hands. “It’s true what they say: charity transforms a person.”

A cold shadow slithers between us and we both turn toward the source at the same time.

“Arguing in the middle of the hallway again?” Dr. Burns’s disapproving glance bears down on us both like the LED surgical lights. “I assumed things had changed with you two since Tony’s surgery.”

Changed? It’d take three centuries for anything to change between Mira and me. That, or a miracle bigger than the parting of the ocean. We’ve been stuck in a deadlock for over a decade, circling each other like wolves. I’m still not sure what the reward is, though.

“We were having a friendly chat,” I chime in. “Between coworkers.”

“Didn’t sound friendly to me,” Dr. Burns walks through the wide gulf of space between Mira and me. “Anyway, I believe you have a procedure to attend to, Lucien, so I’ll do you the favor of breaking up whatever debate you were having.”

“Thank you. There’s nothing I hate more than wasting time.” I throw a pointed look at Mira when I say that.

She sticks out her tongue when Dr. Burns isn’t looking.

I shake my head.

Then get on with my work. I spend five minutes washing my hands before my procedure.

The procedure moves fast, and thankfully, there are no complications. I encounter Mira again in the hallway afterward but Dr. Burns is talking to a patient's caretaker ten feet away and neither of us is stupid enough to risk another lecture from him.

Amanda and Amir, who are leaning over the desk at the nurse's station, showing off vacation pictures with their spouses, gesture for me to join them. If these two were ever out of a job, I'd recommend them to start writing love stories.

The clock in the nurse's station ticks away mercilessly in my ears. Looking at the time only makes me nervous at this point. Only a few hours until seven, which is when I'm supposed to meet my parents for dinner. The last thing I want to do at the end of a busy day like this is to field their pushy pleas and play peacemaker. But I've avoided them one too many times and even I feel guilty sometimes.

'Meeting my parents' is at the top of my list of 'activities I do not enjoy', right beside 'having my apartment catch fire' and 'getting explosive diarrhea'. Talking to them one by one is draining enough but they've both decided that a cardiothoracic surgery fellowship isn't enough stress in my life, so they've gifted me with the opportunity to have dinner with them.

Yeah. This will be fun.

Mira is hanging out with a resident, laughing at something the girl is saying. She's a few feet away from me, but I can't help glancing at her every now and then. She looks so different when she laughs. Less like a warmongering general and more like a ray of sunshine. I wonder what they're talking about. I wonder why we never talk about those kinds of things.

Amir clears his throat.

I pivot, worried I may have missed somebody's recollection of how they knew 'this was the one' when they looked into their spouse's eyes for the first time. I've heard that story one too many times from Amanda to bother feigning interest.

"What?"

Amir's lips are stretched into a frown. "Amanda's hurt you're not listening to her."

"I am listening," I assure. "Thought I saw one of my patients there."

The lie trips off my tongue easily, probably because I want to continue to remain in complete denial about the fact that I was looking at Mira without having any reason to. That I was looking at her and wondering why we fight so much when I don't even hate her. And that I had the sudden urge to talk to her about my impending meeting with my parents. I wanted to pour out my frustrations to my rival because I thought she would...um...listen to them? That I would like to have her listen to them.

I'm making less and less sense these days.

I'm grateful Amanda doesn't call me out. She probably didn't even notice my embarrassing moment of unguardedness. She just continues on with the story of the time she and her wife got robbed in Sao Paulo.

Despite our collegiate banter, which I'm almost enjoying by the time we get to the part where Amir's wife broke up with him because he gave her a vacuum cleaner for her birthday, time isn't on my side. My working hours come to an end soon.

Mira has disappeared from my sight.

I tempt fate by going to check on Tony, but Tony's sleeping, and Joe is nowhere to be seen. Right about now, I'd have appreciated the excuse of being held down by a gangster. Even my parents couldn't find fault with that.

Alas, fate refuses to be tempted from its miserable, straightforward path today.

SEVEN

Mira

Tony aka the mafia dude looks fresh as a red rose by postop day 3. I, on the other hand, look like a zombie. My dark circles were already bad, to begin with. Now they're endless, ever-expanding swamps under my eyes. The last time I moisturized was two days ago. I wouldn't be surprised if someone mistook my skin for a pumice stone.

Tony's in a very philosophical mood when I check on how he's healing after the surgery. The swelling around the surgery wound has subsided and his vitals are stable. He'll still need some supervision, but he should be back to normal in a month or two.

"Good morning," I say, tapping a pen against his patient chart. "How're you feeling?"

When he came in, he had a beard but the nurses shaved him so now he looks quite different. Like a thin Vin Diesel. Joe, the Mafioso of my dark romance dreams, is missing from the scene. I only feel the slightest twinge of disappointment.

Tony mumbles something into his glass of water.

"Can you repeat that?" I say, quickly refocusing my thoughts. Back-to-back night shifts have left me tired, but that isn't an excuse to drift off in the middle of an important conversation with a patient.

“Pride is the real villain of all love stories.” Tony scratches the tube coming out of his chest. “I’m sure it’s what broke your heart, too.”

“Excuse me?”

“Trying to preserve one’s image by pretending to feel nothing when love is all about vulnerability.”

“Um...is your head hurting?” I inquire. I operated on his heart, but the emergency surgeon might’ve failed to check if his head was damaged during the gang fight.

“No, I’m fine. Just thinking about life. I have a lot of time on my hands.”

I nod. “Missing your girlfriend?”

“Don’t have one. And my wife divorced me six years ago.”

Oh. Sore topic, I see. I jump to a different one.

“How did you join the mafia?” I ask Tony. I’ve always been curious about that.

“I swore my loyalty to the don,” Tony replies.

“And your life?” My gaze travels down to the tubes protruding out of his chest.

“Everything I have. It’s like the ultimate love, though some consider it the ultimate sacrifice.”

For someone who was shot days ago, he doesn’t sound bothered. I wish I had this kind of unflappable calm to be ruminating on loyalty after avoiding death by a whisker.

“If you ever feel pain or discomfort around your chest, please let the nurses know,” I tell Tony.

“Doctor,” he calls me when I’ve turned my back to him. “I hope you can recover from your heartbreak. Ice cream helps. But not rebound sex. That just makes it worse.”

I exhale sharply as a repulsive, uncomfortable memory from the past slithers into the forefront of my mind. Gooseflesh erupts all over my body. I feel the visceral slide of

a wet, eager stranger's tongue against the hollow of my neck. No, I don't want to remember that night. I squeeze my eyes shut.

Yeah, Tony's right. Rebound sex is the worst.

Still, I've hit rock bottom if I'm receiving love advice from a Mafioso.

"My heart wasn't broken," I tell Tony, straightening my coat. I need to preserve my image. I don't want to be thought of as a weak, wishy-washy woman. It's already hard to earn respect in this profession.

Tony squints, gray eyes hazed with suspicion. "Then why do you look so sad?"

"Probably because I haven't slept in days." I wave my hand. "Don't worry about me."

I remove myself from the ward before he can offer any further insights, racing down the corridor back to the fellow room. My eyes are rolling out of their sockets in exhaustion and there's no procedure for the next hour. This is the perfect time to get some shut-eye.

Unfortunately, this is also the perfect time for reading all the journals I've been saving for a better day.

My bright computer screen beckons me from across the room. Guilt tears a path down my psyche when I consider swapping sleep for work. I attribute my unhealthy mindset to being an overachiever and my mother's daughter. Plus, to my deep-seated desire to beat Lucien at all costs. It's too late to change me now, though, so with heavy feet, I pad over to my desk. Amanda's desk is beside me, but she's not here.

Strings of tiny letters crawl across the screen, wrapping around my head like a tight rubber band. Pressure punches against my skull. I didn't sleep much last night. Or the night before that. You could say I'm rather sleep-deprived right now. My vision doubles and blurs, white pinpoints of light dancing in front of me instead of words.

I let my eyelids drop. Resting an elbow on the table, I massage my temples. My head is throbbing. And the screen is

too bright. The last thing I need is a headache. But I must soldier on.

I cannot fall behind.

Journal of Cardiothoracic Surgery

I squint at the light radiating off the screen, kneading my forehead. When I get up to grab a drink, the entire room whirls around me like I'm inside a washing machine. A shaky breath leaves me as everything goes black for a split second. I grip the back of my chair, narrowly preventing the dizziness from making my body crash onto the floor. I don't even hear the opening of the door until Lucien's standing beside me, his strong fingers encasing my shoulders.

I do a double-take to make sure he's real.

"What're you doing here?" I straighten.

Shit. I can't look pathetic in front of him. He'll lecture me until tomorrow about being overworked if he realizes I'm having a dizzy spell in the middle of work. Calming my raging head enough to shrug out of his hold, I stealthily slide into the chair. I need to be strong here. I must present myself as the paragon of poise and competence. There's nothing wrong with me. It's just a little dizziness and exhaustion. Nothing life threatening.

Be a big girl, Mira.

"Did you just faint?" Lucien's voice slides around me like a noose. My head grows hot and throbs harder with guilt.

"What? Are you imagining things now?" I spit out in a voice that sounds far more confident than it ought to. "It's just a little headache."

"Headache?" Lucien arches an eyebrow. "I happen to have some Advil on me."

"Don't need it." I rotate my head to the screen up front, drumming my fingers against my thighs.

A disapproving pucker. "You shouldn't neglect your health."

Shut up; you obnoxious jerk, I think to myself, but for obvious reasons, I can't say it out loud.

"I said I'm fine." There's a bite in my voice this time, but it has no effect on Lucien.

"There's no point being stubborn." He powers off my computer screen. "Working now will only make it worse."

Every nerve in my body crackles as Lucien's leg strokes against mine. Pain echoes in my head, rippling through my body to the very tips of my toes. I know he's right but my pride's too strong to let me be wrong. I don't need him treating me like an idiot. My mom handles that part well enough on her own.

"That's my problem," I switch on the screen again. I know what's good for my body and what I can take.

But this is Lucien and being annoying is his full-time job. He switches off the screen again.

"Dammit! Stop."

We engage in a childish war, stabbing our fingers against the power switch, long enough that we break the computer. Because when I poke at the switch for the final time, the screen doesn't light up this time. Great. Dr. Burns will chew us out for this. And after we finally managed to get into his good graces with Tony's surgery.

Lucien slides his hands into his pockets. "This is the universe telling you that you can't win this one. So rest while I get you an Advil."

I hiss. My head hurts and he just won't quit it. I don't have patience for his annoying 'look I'm a doctor so let me tell you what to do' routine right now. This scene feels so disturbingly like my mother and me on a regular day. Anger wells in my chest as memories of being demeaned and told I'm not smart enough to decide what's good for me rise to the surface. Powerlessness, all too familiar, nibbles at the last crumbs of my patience. I won't tolerate being treated like I'm a stupid child.

My legs move forward on their own, carried by the desire to assert myself and I kick the air. “Get lost.”

My sight blacks out at the edges, until Lucien’s smirk is all I can see. He dodges just in time to avoid getting struck by my foot. Color spots scatter across my line of sight as another wave of pain swamps my head. I exerted myself too much. I’m not sure why I reacted so violently except that when we were engaged in our war over the computer screen, every time the edge of his fingers scraped mine, the friction made something dense coagulate at the bottom of my stomach. Until I can’t stand it anymore.

“Do you seriously believe you can overpower me in your weak, sleepless state?” Lucien’s haughty, snobby voice is a war cry to my ears.

I snap to my feet, the whole world swimming around me like I’m underwater. “Who’re you calling weak?”

One minute I’m grabbing his collar and the next minute he has flipped our positions around. The hard surface of the wall collides against my spine. Luci’s hands are planted on either side of me, nailing me to the wall. His body is half-slumped against mine, his face a mask of smug sexiness.

I want to hate him for this, but I started this physical confrontation. In my defense, I wasn’t thinking at all, just acting on instinct, trying to get rid of the frustration circling my belly.

My eyelids drop closed and the darkness is so soothing, so comforting, I never want to look at light again. My knees buckle and I begin to sink, the effortless ease of the fall a sweet, sweet relief compared to the agonizing effort of staying upright. But I must’ve underestimated my willpower, because I open my eyes before I faint, grabbing a fistful of Lucien’s scrubs and barely keep myself from falling.

I’m receiving help from his arm that’s supporting my back. As his head swings forward, I see his hair’s all messed up. He smells expensive and relaxing—like a hotel room where I want to sink into a soft mattress and go to sleep.

“What’s wrong, Mira? Are you admitting you’re weak?” he taunts, bracing with his left arm as if he’s expecting me to throw a punch at him any moment.

I would, except when his scent infiltrates my nostrils, it climbs straight to my head. I realize he’s barely inches from me. Close enough to kiss.

My blood pressure shoots through the stratosphere. A tight, curling pressure escalates in my chest.

Yes, I want to tell him. I’m weak.

We’ve never been so close. It’s doing funny things to my head. Or maybe that’s the sleeplessness. Why does Luci look like someone different in this lighting?

His fingers are on my throat. All the dark, desperate thoughts that I usually keep a lid on are leaking out. Up close, I can’t ignore the effect Lucien has on me. On every part of me. My heart rate’s soaring. My knees are liquid. Heat floods the sensitive flesh between my legs, intensifying the ache in my stomach. My thighs clench painfully as his thumb traces the curve of my scalp under my hair. All I want is for him to dig his fingers deeper into my body. To erase the narrow sliver of space between our mouths. I want to feel the texture of his tongue, the light grazes of his lips sliding over mine.

I’m officially going crazy. What have three days of sleeplessness turned me into?

I need to remind myself that I hate Lucien Stone. He’s my number one rival, a serial heartbreaker, and a pain in the ass. Also, the biggest snob in the world with an ego the size of Jupiter. But he’s also my first love and colleague and... he’s right in front of me, close enough to touch...

“Luci...” I whisper.

His pupils blow out into big, wide black discs at the frailness of that single word. The effect my voice has on him and the way his gaze stalks me sets off sparks in my chest. I’ve never felt so powerful and so scared at the same time. Lucien raises his arms to wrap them around me—his best attempt at offering comfort. A friendly hug. I could do with

that. I deeply, desperately want to fall into his arms—anybody’s arms—and surrender to the darkness of sleep.

I know this, but my body’s no longer listening to my brain. My head falls forward and I end up head-butting him instead. My hands close around his throat rather than around his torso. Lucien startles, transforming the earlier gentleness in his eyes into anger.

I should probably explain, probably apologize. That I wasn’t trying to strangle him. I was only trying to hold on. My fingers fall away.

“Bad move.” His palm presses into my forehead, getting my head-butting head away from him before I head-butt him again, until the back of my head is plastered against the wall.

And, at that unfortunate moment, the door suddenly swings open, and there, with a halo of light around his body stands the last person I want to see—Dr. Burns.

EIGHT

Lucien

Fuck. That's the only word my mind comes up with when I realize the mess I'm in.

Dr. Burns, the program director, is a rigid pole in the open doorway. Amanda and Amir are anchored at his sides like twin pillars. While my body is pressed against Mira's.

Mira's drowsiness has evaporated; she's suddenly alert, mouth open wide with terror. My own body feels numb and exhausted, though. I can feel the oncoming storm. My heart thunders like a heavy bassline through speakers.

Dr. Burn's attention hovers over me like a sword about to drop and cut off my head. And to make the humiliation of this moment ten times worse, Amanda giggles. I don't have the bandwidth to pay attention to her expressions, though I expect it is somewhat like the shock and anger contorting Dr. Burns's face.

"Lucien Stone, what are you doing?" The program director's words boom in my ears like lightning cracking across the sky. But ten times scarier. "The university doesn't tolerate sexual harassment or physical violence in any form."

Sexual harassment? What does he even...oh shit. My gaze shifts to Mira pinned to the wall, my elbow pressed under her throat, my fingers tangled in her hair and I know what actually happened, but to someone who doesn't, this could very well

look like...well...I'm trying to attack her. Or something worse.

“It’s not like that.” My defense sounds weak as I extricate myself. “I was just helping—”

Dr. Burns cuts me off with a glower cold enough to put the entire hospital in deep freeze for three thousand years. His eyes are narrowed dangerously on me. “I realize you’ve both been engaged in a childish competition for years. And I have no doubt you’d do anything to hurt each other after the stunt Mira pulled at the operating room last year, but I can’t believe your animosity would devolve to a level where you’d go so far as to physically assault each other.”

“It wasn’t physical assault—”

“Well, that’s what it looks like to my eyes. Wouldn’t you agree?” He arcs back to Amanda and Amir. They stiffen.

“Lucien does seem to be choking Mira.” Amanda squints at me, mischief shimmering in her eyes.

“And she’s against the wall...” Amir trails off, glancing back at Dr. Burns, looking like he’d rather be anywhere else. His chin is pointed downward, his focus pinned on his shoes. He’s a confrontation averse guy so this has to be taking a toll on him.

The program director combs his hand through his hair, jaw hardening into a resolute square. “The university rules state that you can be expelled for failing to conduct yourselves in an appropriate, collegiate manner in the workplace—”

“No.” This time, it’s Mira’s turn to choke. She was feeling all lightheaded before, but her entire system seems to have been shocked back into reality by Dr. Burns’s presence to the debacle that is now unfolding in the fellow room. “I asked Lucien to do it.”

“What does that mean? You asked him to hurt you? At the hospital? Are you out of your mind?” Dr. Burns bellows once again, incensed. His nostrils are flaring. I have never felt so worried in my life. I’m afraid if this goes on for any longer, Mira and I might both get expelled from the fellowship. And I

might just end up getting legal action taken against me, which would taint my entire career.

All because of a misunderstanding.

“No...I mean...yes...” Mira’s brain seems to have short-circuited. She’s stuttering without making any point.

Oh boy. I need to think. Dr. Burns already believes the worst of us. He has been wary of us ever since we started the fellowship and rumors of our rivalry became water cooler gossip. He doesn’t trust me. Or Mira. He only trusts his eyes and his judgment.

Cold terror grips my muscles. We might both lose our jobs right now.

“We were just teasing each other. Playing around,” I try. My brain is also not exactly operating at its peak, but brushing this off as a casual prank might just be worth a try. I need to do something to bring down the seriousness in this room.

“This is not ‘playing around’, Lucien.” Dr. Burns’s voice could cut steel. “And I do not want anybody at this hospital who doesn’t understand how to discern the line between animosity and violence.”

Amanda’s loud sigh fills the precarious silence in the room. “I told you to stop being so competitive. As colleagues, we should support each other.”

“She’s right,” Amir says, his brows an angry X at the center of his forehead. “Fighting with each other isn’t going to solve anything.”

My heartbeat slows and I realize the depth of the hole we’ve dug with our constant competitiveness throughout the years. Even our close colleagues don’t believe in me. Don’t they realize I’d never hurt a woman? I’d never hurt anyone. I’m a doctor. My hands are for saving lives. And I don’t even dislike Mira. We just bicker a little every now and then. But people only see what they want to see. The rumors of Mira’s and my rivalry have become so exaggerated they’ve taken a life of their own.

Last week, I heard one of the nurses gossiping that I bullied Mira during our residency and that's why she's fighting back against me. That's not even remotely true.

Dr. Burns slips his fingers into his coat pocket to dig out his phone. Blood rushes to my brain in a deafening roar.

No, no, no. He can't call the academic discipline committee or it's all over.

A cocktail of humiliation, fear, and danger is corroding my nerves. I need to find a way to wriggle out of this situation or I'm doomed. And Mira will be, too.

I arc my head back to her. Her eyes are misty and red. Her fingers, perched on her stomach, are trembling. Is she about to cry? I know this fellowship and being a doctor and making her mother proud means a lot to her. Unlike me, she doesn't even have rich parents to fall back on. If Dr. Burns throws us out of the program, she'll be devastated. Her entire future will be ruined. Everything she worked so hard for all these years will be gone.

Despite how long we've been rivals, I can't help but feel bad for her.

I take a deep breath, willing myself to think through calmly.

I can't let us go down. We must both survive this year. There's only a few months before graduation. It's too late in the game for us to lose. I must salvage this situation somehow.

As Dr. Burns taps his phone screen, a brainwave hits me.

I grab Mira's hand and mutter under my breath, "Just go along with everything I say from this point."

"What?" She's so shaken it takes her a while for my words to sink in, but in the end she gives a small nod. Desperation is leaking through her pores. I think she'd put her faith in Satan right now, and I'm definitely smarter and more gorgeous than Satan.

"You've all misunderstood," I announce in a loud, confident voice. "Tell them, Mira."

“That’s right,” she agrees shakily. “It’s not what you’re thinking.”

I squeeze her hand. Then release a hollow chuckle. “Well, it’s embarrassing to admit what actually happened, but I guess there’s no point hiding it anymore. Mira and I are dating and well...we just got a little frisky because we thought there was nobody around.”

I feel Mira’s pulse spike under my fingers. She inhales noisily through her mouth and I’m afraid she’s about to whack me on the head and tell me I’ve lost my mind.

But instead, she goes along with my story like she promised.

“I asked Lucien to push me against the wall and be rough with me. I’m...into that.” For a moment, those words, so unlike anything usually uttered in a hospital, hang in the air like poisoned darts.

Dr. Burns clears his throat like he just caught the world’s worst cold. Amanda and Amir’s mouths are perfect Os behind him. Nobody—including me—expected straight-laced Mira to suddenly confess to something so out of the realms of her personality.

God, I can’t imagine what it must’ve taken for her to admit that aloud. My cheeks are on fire just from hearing her admit that she has a kink for dominance. Not just my cheeks—a lot of parts of me are on fire.

Still, I feel an inkling of admiration for her. And gratitude, for not throwing me to the wolves.

She’s a tough cookie. And I never realized how tough she was until now. Though our current situation is fucked up as anything, I’m oddly relieved that it’s her who is in this soup with me, not anyone else. Because I’m not sure anybody else would’ve put their dignity on the line to cover for me.

“Dating?” Dr. Burns looks at me like I just told him the brain is made of candy. “You two? Is this a joke?”

We have dug our grave with our own competitiveness. Nobody believes us anymore.

“No. We’re serious,” I say. “I mean; if you think about it, it has been obvious of late. We even performed that procedure on the gunshot patient together.”

“Ah...so that was why.” Dr. Burns’s skeptical expression fades a little. Air fills back into my lungs and I didn’t realize how stiff my shoulders were until I loosen them. I think we’ve managed to convince him a little.

“We live close to each other,” Mira adds. “That was a calculated decision.”

I’m sure it was. But only because we were rivals and wanted to beat each other during our morning exercise routine. Not because we’re fucking in love. But that detail is best left out.

Mira squares her shoulders and steps closer to me until my nostrils fill with the faint citrus scent that emanates from her every morning. “Actually, we didn’t want to tell anyone about our relationship. Dating a coworker looks bad.”

“But the cat’s out of the bag now.” I curve one arm around her shoulder. It’s the most unnatural and awkward half-hug ever. God save us, I think we’ll be terrible at this dating thing. And we haven’t even started yet. “I’m really sorry for making all of you uncomfortable.”

“Well.” Dr. Burns adjusts his glasses, looking at Amanda and Amir, lost for words. “This is unusual. I haven’t faced a situation like this in my career.”

“The university doesn’t forbid office romance in its rules,” Amanda slips in helpfully. I remind myself to thank her for that later.

“I don’t have anything against it, either. If it *is* actually an office romance,” Dr. Burns says. His expression sharpens, hitting me like a nail aimed at my head. He should be a psychic not a doctor. His intuition’s so on point. “For both your sakes, I hope you’re telling the truth. If I find out that you were lying about this, there will be a stiff penalty to pay. And I won’t be giving any second chances to you two after this.”

“We’re totally serious,” I assure him.

“I’m not surprised you don’t believe us. I think we may have gone overboard trying to look like we hate each other. We didn’t want anyone to suspect.” Mira turns her face to me. Her expression is so sweet it could give me diabetes. Not even in my wildest fever dreams did I ever picture her smiling at me like this—like she actually likes me. My heart rate escalates. A light feeling envelops my chest.

“Overboard?” Dr. Burns echoes. “How long has this been going on?”

“We started dating during our residency,” I say because that’s the only logical explanation. “But it’s been on and off.”

“It’s sort of a love-hate relationship,” Mira agrees.

“I don’t have a hard time believing that. You’ve shown us how deeply you hate each other often enough during your time here.” Dr. Burns shakes his head like he’s still struggling to comprehend how Mira and I could have a romantic relationship behind his back. That’d make two of us. “But now that your secret is out in the open, I’d like to see you two get along. No more pranks in the operating room or screaming at each other in the hallways.”

“Or anywhere,” Amanda adds.

“Maybe we could go on a triple date sometime,” Amir offers and Mira hisses.

She’s right. I don’t want to go on any dates with her if I can avoid it, either. We’d probably frustrate each other to death. And it has been ages since I went out with anyone. Medical education has sucked up most of my youth.

Dr. Burns casts a last, lingering glance at the two of us. “You are the most troublesome fellows I’ve ever taught.”

“But also the most brilliant, right?” I finish, hoping to lighten the mood.

One side of the program director’s mouth curves upward in a reluctant smile. He clasps his hand behind his back and strolls away, but not before warning us one last time that he will be watching us *very carefully* from this moment on and we had better not mess up again.

“Because there will be no second chances,” are his parting words.

Amanda, fingers clasped in front of her, studies us with a pained expression etched upon her features. She definitely knows we just lied through our noses. I’d be grateful if she doesn’t bring it up, though.

“At least you both look hot together. Good luck. ” Amanda’s slumped shoulders rise a notch. She angles her head at Amir, communicating something telepathically through her eyes alone before skipping along to join Dr. Burns.

Amir sweeps into the room and crushes us both in a hug. “Congratulations, guys. Who knows? This could be a good thing. You two might actually start liking each other once you start to see yourselves as more than rivals.”

I love his optimism, even though I feel none of it.

When he lets go, Mira and I stare at each other. For the first time in our association, neither of us is in the mood to come up with any wise quips.

We both know we’re fucked.

NINE

Mira

It doesn't take long for the dating lie to unravel. In fact, it only takes twelve hours. It's the small details that give us away, like only getting coffee for ourselves, eating snacks from the vending machine all alone despite being on break together, and ignoring or sneering when we pass each other outside operating rooms.

Also, our flirty banter is...well...not on point.

"You're looking tolerable today, Mira. Did you buy expensive skin products again? I must say, cosmetics can work miracles these days," Lucien says while leaning against the desk of the nurse's station, hoping to be heard. Publicizing our office romance has become the number one priority on our agenda since last evening.

"No need to flatter me, Luci." I tie up my hair into a ponytail, rubbing my dry skin. "I know I look like a shipwreck."

"Don't be offensive to shipwrecks now."

Cara, one of the ER nurses, clicks her tongue, looking up from her work. "In my time, men actually tried."

'Try harder' I mouth to Luci. His next line, though, just makes it worse.

"What I meant was that you're nothing like an average shipwreck..." Lucien sighs. "You're like the Titanic."

“Too stupid to avoid an iceberg?” I raise my eyebrow.

“Well, you said it yourself.”

I facepalm. This is not working out. We’re too deeply entrenched in our old ways to suddenly start acting lovey-dovey.

The worst part is, I know Lucien isn’t so bad at romance otherwise. I’ve seen him hold umbrellas for other women, open doors for them, take them to candlelit dinners, and once, even pay off someone’s student debts. Maybe it’s our relationship. It’s unsalvageable.

I can’t even fathom the notion of willingly being nice to Lucien. In fact, I have no idea what that would look like anymore.

Casual smiles? Asking about each other’s days? Caring about each other? Holding hands and pouring our feelings out to each other? Crying on each other’s shoulders?

All that feels like too much. Like scratching an open wound. Like exposing a part of myself that I want to keep under lock and key.

Luci and I weren’t always rivals. When we first met in high school, I actually liked him. In the romantic sense. I would die before I admit this out loud, but Luci was my first crush. I was completely mesmerized by his intellect, popularity, and good looks. He was like every sixteen-year-old’s wet dream come to life.

I made transparent attempts to get close to him by pretending to be interested in the same colleges as him, which worked. We worked on a few assignments together and it seemed like things were going somewhere. Until he showed me his true colors.

“I don’t understand what you’re trying to pull here,” he said one day, looking at me like I had grenades strapped to my chest.

“I want to be friends with you,” I said, shaken at his harsh tone.

“What? I don’t want to be your friend. What would give you that idea?”

I nearly cried when he said that, but saving face and preserving my dignity had been ingrained into me from a young age, so I just brushed him off with a casual, “Oh. Never mind then.”

That’s how our competition started. With me being rejected, and then vowing to make him as miserable as he’d made me by beating him at everything. Yes, I remember it now. My mother’s compliments only compounded my resentment toward him, but what started it was having my heart broken.

I can’t have our association end with my heart being broken again.

“What’re you doing?” I ask Lucien as we’re both checking up on Tony. Joe aka Black Suit is missing and Tony seems to have made a good recovery though he’ll still be spending some more time with us.

“Smiling at you,” Lucien replies. “Are you not familiar with smiles?”

“I am. But there’s nobody here, so you can drop the act.”

“Tony’s here,” Lucien argues.

“He’s a patient who’ll be gone soon.”

“How soon?” Tony pipes up. “Can I be discharged tomorrow?”

“Not that soon,” I tell him.

Lucien checks the numbers on Tony’s monitor.

Tony clears his throat. “The nurses were discussing you two earlier. About how hot you are for each other. I heard things got real steamy yesterday, and some X-rated shit with BDSM and whatnot went down between you two. Tell me, were handcuffs involved? I’m partial to a bondage kink myself.”

My cheeks go up in flames at Tony's words. Lucien ejects a cough, dropping his pen.

"Those rumors are exaggerated," he mumbles.

"But not entirely untrue?" Tony quips. "Then you two really can't keep your hands off each other?"

Neither Lucien nor I reply.

Clearly, both our minds have gone to the same place—that dump where I'm fantasizing about imaginary hot sex with Lucien. My mind's a torture machine sometimes.

I can't help but be pissed off at fate's twisted sense of humor. Lucien rejected a real relationship with me all those years ago, but now we're fake dating (thanks to him) and rumors of our fake sex life are the talk of the town. Ironic much?

"I'll wait for my next dose of news," Tony tells us as we leave.

"There won't be any," I declare in a stern voice. Having my colorful (and nonexistent) sex life become public knowledge at my workplace is not an experience I'm prepared to navigate, with or without Lucien.

But Tony's words and the (very embellished) rumors about how we were attacking each other like starved wolves in the fellow room hang over my head like a sword.

Add to that the lust I felt for Luci right before Dr. Burns caught us which I still have no explanation for.

It makes things so awkward between us that whatever show we've managed to put on since morning fizzles out to nothing. We can't even meet each other's eyes anymore.

The result is that, by afternoon, the rumors are swirling in a completely new direction. Our coldness has incited debates on whether we've broken up already.

"You'll have to work harder than that if you're hoping to convince anyone," Amir finally tells us during lunch break, when the four CS fellows have miraculously gathered together at the hospital's café to eat our lunches together. "I mean; I

don't mind you guys lying. I understand your circumstances. But if the gossip from the nurses spreads any further up, Dr. Burns will catch wind of it and you'll both be looking at the end of your fellowships."

"As much as your immaturity gets on my nerves, you're both amazing colleagues and I don't want to lose you," Amanda adds. She places a hand over mine, flashing a gentle smile.

"I'm trying." I groan into my Minute Maid orange juice.

"So am I," Lucien says. "But that only seems to be making everything worse."

"You need a plan," Amir says around a bite of his sandwich. "A foolproof plan."

"And unless this plan is about to fall from the sky, I don't see how we're going to come up with it. I've never dated in my life," I admit. "Much less had a relationship with someone in my workplace. I have no idea what that even looks like."

"Neither do I." Lucien's admittance nearly makes me fall out of my chair. I totally assumed that with the number of hookups he has had, at least one of them would've led to a date. But maybe he's a total commitment-phobe. Or maybe all the women he slept with were smart enough to recognize what an egomaniac he was.

Amanda whips out her phone and —surprise, surprise—shoves another couple selfie with Ruby in our faces. Today's edition. "This is what love looks like."

"Like a no-makeup selfie?" I ask.

"Like two middle-aged women trying to act cute?" Lucien asks.

"You're hopeless." Amanda drops a long exhale. "No wonder you've been single all your life. You wouldn't recognize love if it punched you in the face."

She returns her phone to her white coat's pocket and nibbles on her lovingly homemade lunch quietly. It consists of

sandwiches that smell far too good to be mere sandwiches. There must be some high-quality stuff between those loaves.

“I’m still surprised you two have been single for as long as you have,” Amir starts. “Forgive me, but from an outsider’s perspective, you’re both good-looking, smart, and successful. You seem like the social ideal.”

“I think you’re forgetting about their personalities,” Amanda supplies. “It’s not easy getting along with...” She pauses. “Obsessive people.”

Lucien rolls his eyes. “It’s called dedication to the medical field.”

“I meant your obsession with each other.”

I don’t deny it. It’s true. We’re kinda obsessed with beating each other. I’ve often felt like it’s the only thing that matters in my life anymore. It’s a vampire that sucks all my energy and still, I give it more willingly.

Sure, there have been times I’ve wanted to stop. But if I stop, we’ll have no reason to talk to each other so much anymore. Lucien’s pretty much the only regular social interaction I have in my life. I’m terrible at making friends. Plus, I have very little free time and my life revolves around surgery. It’s not easy finding people who can understand that.

“Amanda, will you stop discussing our flaws and brainstorm ideas on how to clean up this mess?” I beg. “I can’t afford to have my career go up in smoke.”

“I’m not sure about a plan, but for a start, why don’t you go on a triple date with us?” Amanda says. “Amir and I already have an overnight trip to Niagara Falls planned for next weekend with our wives. You should join us.”

“Good idea!” Amir exclaims. “We can take pictures and post them on social media where it’ll be seen by Dr. Burns.”

I don’t hate the plan. I’ve been wanting to go on a holiday for a long time but I never had the motivation to get off my ass and actually do it. I don’t even care that I have to spend an entire weekend around Lucien. I spend most of my days in his presence anyway.

I blink at Amir who looks a bit scared at the thought of spending his time off with us. “Um...I don’t want to ruin your time with your spouses.”

“Oh, Ruby has been dying to meet you two. I think this will be a trip to remember.” Amanda slaps me on the back. “And who knows? Maybe you’ll finally realize that you can have fun with Lucien even when you’re not trying to outdo him.”

“I’m very fun to be around,” Lucien interjects. “Also, Mira has never beaten me at anything.”

“As delusional as ever, I see,” I snap.

“Enough with the bickering already.” Amanda shakes her head, shoulders dropping in defeat. “Actually, I’ve just realized that we need rules so you two don’t test my patience while we’re on vacation. So, for the entire duration of the weekend, I forbid you from competing with each other or saying mean things. No battles over who booked the more expensive room or who got the better picture of the waterfalls or anything else. Not only that, you must strive to be nice to each other, not take every opportunity to bicker and put the other down.”

Sweat beads down my hands. Shit. Amanda knows us too well. She has cut off all our escape routes.

“Sounds fair.” Amir leaves the crusts of his finished Pret-a-Manger sandwich in the packet. “We’re letting you both tag along, so you need to respect our time and rules.”

“Fine. I can do it. But this challenge might prove too hard for Luci. He doesn’t even know what nice means.”

“I can do it,” Lucien snaps. “Better be prepared to eat your words, Mira.”

“Not again. You’re already competing.” Amir rubs his hands over his face. He trades an exasperated look with Amanda. “We’ll have to find some way to make sure this doesn’t happen on the trip.”

“I’ll be on my best behavior during the weekend. I promise,” I say.

Amanda slides her hands across the table. “Your assurances don’t convince me. So, to enforce my rules, I have created another rule: if you say something mean or fight during the trip, you’ll have to kiss each other.”

“Properly on the lips. With tongue and everything,” Amir adds with a wink.

Lucien chokes on his chicken wrap and I’m glad I don’t have anything in my mouth or I’d be doing the same.

Amanda and Amir high five, satisfied smiles pasted on their lips.

“God, how I’d love to see you kiss twelve times a day.” Amanda giggles.

I grimace. “It won’t come to that.”

Amanda’s words bring back the unwelcome feeling in my belly that I experienced on the day I almost kissed Lucien in the fellow room. What if we’d gone all the way? What would his lips have felt like? No, wait. Why am I wondering what Lucien’s lips would feel like? That’s completely unnecessary.

Luci and me kissing is a more unlikely scenario than a comet destroying Earth tomorrow.

“Oh, don’t be so sure.” Amir makes a snapping motion in the air with his fingers. “I’ll keep my camera handy to capture all those steamy moments. Dr. Burns and the nurses are going to love it.”

Amanda gives me a pat on the shoulders. “I guess they’re destined to be the couple who can’t keep their hands off each other.”

My mouth feels sticky. The taste of my lunch has turned to sawdust.

Oh, god, what have I gotten myself into?

“So the day has come,” I say, sliding into the seat opposite Lucien’s at the café that’s two blocks down from our apartments. My week on-call has ended, but that doesn’t mean I have tons of free time. Because now there’s this stupid dating thing to consider.

Technically, we could’ve held our unofficial ‘contract’ meeting at one of our homes, but that would involve negotiating which would involve compromise, which, in turn, would involve one party losing. Knowing us, it would turn into a war that would go on for another two years so we decided to cut our losses and meet at a neutral location.

I’ve never been in this café before. It’s very quiet at this time of the day, which makes it perfect for our purposes. The aroma of roasted coffee beans wafts through the air as I wind my way over to the corner where Lucien is staring at his laptop. Deep lines have dug into his forehead and his thumb is pressed into his temple. I scan his outfit: white shirt, red sweater, white pants, black jacket. He looks preppy, like an Abercrombie and Fitch ad.

My shadow grazes the edge of his vision. His head twitches left and one more line appears between his brows when he spots me.

“Good morning, Mira,” he says, voice steady as ever.

“You seem eager to get this out of the way,” I remark, taking in the number of sugary snacks packed onto the small table: muffins, croissants, Linzer tortes, oatmeal raisin cookies, and chocolate biscottis. I’ve heard about couples mirroring each other’s habits, but I guess rivals mirror each other, too. Lucien and I both have a habit of eating too much sugar when we’re stressed.

“I am,” Luci admits, kneading his eyelids. “I don’t know how long your goodwill will last, and I need to get something on paper before you decide to stab me in the back.”

“This is not an episode of Game of Thrones.” I curl my lip in amusement. “I’m not battling you for a crown.”

“I have more to lose than you,” Lucien says. “I’m surprised you didn’t go along with Dr. Burns’s version of events—you could’ve gotten me kicked out of the fellowship.”

“Unlike you, I have a conscience. It was my fault, too.” It doesn’t hurt my ego to admit that I was wrong. I’m not that fragile. Also, considering my embarrassing feelings of lust toward him, I feel pretty guilty. I was the one who moved my head, which led to the whole sequence of events. “Besides, how will I compete with you and make you admit I’m better than you if you’re no longer a surgeon?”

Lucien bites into a cookie, and before I can blink thrice, it has disappeared into the ether. “I’m glad I had that favor saved up from residency.”

“Yeah, you were lucky. But you have no more favors remaining.” My hair’s wet from the shower this morning. I had no time to dry it because I didn’t want to be late for my meeting with Lucien. There’s a big wet patch on the back of my T-shirt.

I wipe a bead of water from my forehead.

I thought all my issues would be over once I was not on-call anymore but somehow, I’m facing a much worse problem.

Dating Luci. It’s not something I ever imagined would happen, especially not under the crazy circumstances that it did. It puts the plots of all the romance novels I’ve ever read to shame. Back when Luci asked me for the favor, I could never have expected it’d end up being *this*.

“We need to iron out the terms of our arrangement before our fake triple date slash vacation.” Lucien’s voice yanks me away from my thoughts. His face looks morose. A visible stubble lines his chiseled jaw. He looks like he hasn’t properly eaten or slept since we were caught by Dr. Burns.

I haven’t gotten much sleep, either. Most nights, I stay awake worrying that we’ll get caught. That someone will realize that though we’ve started buying each other coffee,

smiling in the hallways, talking about our vacation plans, and spouting unnecessary facts about Niagara Falls, we're nothing more than rivals lying to save ourselves.

"I took the liberty of drafting the terms and conditions of our fake dating partnership." He flips his laptop around so I can read the 5-page contract that he's written. It's titled 'fake dating agreement'.

This agreement is between Lucien Stone, hereinafter Party #1, and Mira Krishnan, hereinafter Party #2.

He goes on to detail our addresses and social security numbers, followed by the duties of both parties.

"Do you know anything about the law?" I'm surprised at how much jargon he has managed to cram into one page so far. "Or, let me guess...you used Mommy and Daddy's money to hire an expensive lawyer to write this up for you?"

"I don't intend for this agreement to be legally binding," Lucien replies. "It's for our eyes only. To set expectations clearly from the start."

My gaze reaches lower in the document where the very first entry under DUTIES states:

1. Both parties agree to pretend to be romantically involved until both parties obtain final certifications from the American Board of Thoracic Surgery. If asked by anyone about the relationship between them on any future date, both parties will uphold the lie that they were romantically involved during the final months of their fellowship in order to avoid suspicion of fraud.

"We have to pretend-date until we're board certified?" That's at least eight months away. Every cell in my body rebels at the thought of being nice to Lucien for so long. "We can't break up earlier and say it didn't work out?"

"No. Dr. Burns already doesn't believe us and I'd prefer to not have other people questioning our honesty until we've graduated and are out of harm's way. If you're afraid you'll find someone else in the meantime, there's a provision for that under the provisions section."

I scroll down quickly to the bullet points under Provisions. There's something about if we want to have romantic and intimate relationships with other people, we'll have to keep them a secret and not use them as an excuse to break up. Informing the other party of the relationship is optional.

I hover the mouse over the provision, reading it again. "This is not a problem for me, but do you even understand what secrecy means? I mean, all your one-night stands were water cooler gossip at our old hospital. And you had that big argument with the anesthesiologist when he found out you were sleeping with his daughter. It was epic."

The corners of Lucien's lips turn downward. "I wasn't trying to hide anything back then. It'll be different now."

"Wait." I sit up straight. "Are you already seeing someone?"

"I'll leave that to your imagination."

I want to be all 'Whatever. What do I care?' about it, but my stomach's churning like I ate a bad burrito. I hate myself for being so rattled by Lucien's love life. Sure, my sex life's always been nonexistent, but I've never felt bad about that. I chose to be single until I find someone who can meet my standards. So why am I suddenly jealous of Lucien?

"Can I have her name, at least?" I ask. "I feel it's my duty to warn the poor unfortunate woman about you."

"There's nothing poor or unfortunate about her," Lucien says.

He's being irritatingly tight-lipped about this possible girlfriend of his. Who is she? Is she someone I know? My fingers unconsciously curl into fists as a wave of powerlessness washes over my body. I've never seen him with the same woman twice. But I can't stop my knees from shaking or the tightness in my chest from worsening at the thought that he might be going steady with someone all of a sudden. And now we're fake dating.

"So." I start typing. "Can we change this provision to no actual dating while we're fake dating each other? Think of the

complications that could arise if your friends see us together and misunderstand.”

Lucien stretches his neck. “Not a problem since I have no friends so no one will misunderstand anything.”

“You have nosy colleagues, though.”

I don’t know if I can convince him. He doesn’t have anything to lose. And at this moment, it seems like I have everything to lose.

“But,” Lucien continues, sticking one arrogant finger in the air like he’s giving a TED talk. “If you’re feeling insecure, I’m willing to remain single for as long as I’m your fake boyfriend.”

“Insecure? Me?” I cackle. “I’m only worried that you’ll think with your dick and do something stupid like sleeping with Dr. Burns’s daughter. You’ve messed with a colleague’s daughter before, and I’m not willing to take the chance that you won’t do it again.”

I must say, I’m thoroughly impressed by the logical soundness of my argument. The earlier powerlessness ebbs a bit. I release a villainous laugh inwardly. Luci’s logical to a fault. He’ll definitely cave. Manipulating people might be my hidden talent.

Lucien’s face contorts into a mask of scorn and he throws a whole Linzer cookie into his mouth, angrily chomping it down. “Come on. I’m not that immature. Also, Dr. Burns doesn’t have any children.”

“You’ll find some other way to blow our cover. I just know it.” I stab a finger into my soft belly. “Gut instinct.”

“Fine.” Lucien acquiesces, pulling the laptop away from me. He hammers away furiously at the keys until the provision has been amended to: *Both parties agree to not be romantically or sexually involved with other people during the fake dating relationship.*

I nod at the new clause, chest swelling with pride at my minor yet consequential victory.

But Lucien doesn't look beaten. He looks victorious as he slowly sips his coffee, tongue darting out and licking a sensual line around the rim of the cup.

A supercilious smirk replaces his previous stony expression and he pokes his nose up in the air. "Can't believe I'm your first exclusive relationship. Don't know whether I should be depressed at my misfortune or envy your luck."

"What luck do you speak of?" I flap my arms around like I'm trying to catch a mythical fairy. "Can't see any."

Lucien clears his throat. I read on.

"The two parties must avoid sexual intimacy with each other at all costs." That's the first item in the RULES section, paraphrased. Nothing unexpected there. I'd have asked for it if he'd left it out.

"This is fake dating, and I'm not about to make you *that* lucky," Luci explains. I roll my eyes so hard, it's a miracle they stay glued to my sockets. "But we could forbid all types of intimacy if you like."

"What about casual hugs and kisses? After being caught making out in the fellow room, I'm sure people will find it suspicious if we don't so much as hold hands."

"Can you imagine holding hands with me?"

"Frankly? No." It's a lie because the moment I utter it, all I can think about is how beautiful Lucien's fingers look splayed over the dark wooden table, and how much lovelier they'd look splayed over my body. Heat rages through me like wildfire. I dig my nails into my thighs. What a crazy thought. My brain must be totally wiped out after my week on-call. "But we'll have to, or our charade will fall apart."

Without waiting for his response, I skip over to the second rule.

It makes me gag.

Don't fall in love with Party #1.

"Does your ego know no bounds? Why would I fall in love with you?" I scream, so loudly that it startles the barista who

was merrily brewing a cup of coffee at the counter.

Lucien takes a whiff of his biscotti. “Because I’m irresistible.”

“I’ve seen man-eating crocodiles that are more irresistible than you.”

“You need to look up the definition of irresistible again.”

I was wondering where his ego had been hiding all this time. But it seems to have broken through whatever fears chained it the last few days. Perhaps that has something to do with the two model-looking women who just walked into the café and are giving Lucien an openly admiring look. He dishes out one of his mass-manufactured smiles, showing his perfectly white teeth to full advantage.

“See?” He points at himself. “Irresistible.”

Pfft! If my parents were multi-millionaires, I’d be able to get dental treatments to make my teeth look perfect, too. And who knows what cosmetic work Luci has gotten. One of the residents we work with told me he uses a \$200 face serum every day. Must be the reason his face is smoother than a wax statue.

“Good for me I’m not attracted to irresistible men,” I mutter, stabling my sharp fingernails into the table’s surface while imagining Luci’s eyeballs there.

Lucien leans back and plants his hands at the edge of the table, looking impossibly large and dominating like he owns this place. Given his level of delusion, he probably thinks he does. “I’ve been curious, actually. What kind of men are you attracted to? Are you even attracted to men? Or anyone? Because I’ve never seen you date or hook up.”

“I have better things to do in life than waste my time on meaningless relationships.”

“Like what?”

“Beating you. Becoming the best surgeon ever.” And reading romance and erotica novels with great sex that I doubt

anybody can give me in real life. But my arch-nemesis doesn't need to know that.

"That can't be taking up all your time." Lucien's knuckles are drumming against the table now. "I do those things, too, and still find the energy for extracurricular activities."

"I'm not you. I didn't make a deal with the devil and exchange my soul for inhuman energy and an unrealistic sleep schedule." I sniff the air. "I suppose that's why I still have my soul."

"The soul is a metaphysical construct with no scientific basis." Lucien wipes cookie crumbs off his lips.

"You know what else doesn't have a scientific basis? Your arrogance."

Lucien tugs at the V-neck of his sweater before yanking it up to his head slowly like he's performing a tantalizing striptease for everyone in the café. My stomach ties itself into a confusing knot. His white shirt puts broad shoulders on display and his biceps flex like they were made to hoard attention. I make a mental note to ramp up my strength training.

Luci doesn't miss my jealousy.

"Jealous because nobody's looking at you?" He quirks his lip, sparing another glance at the two women who were appreciating him earlier. They're still drooling over him from their new vantage point—the table opposite ours—while chewing on their leafy salads. Some people just have bad taste, I guess.

"I'm not an attention whore like you," I say through gritted teeth.

"Still." He licks his lips in a way that's both sexy and annoying and then annoyingly sexy. "You must wonder somewhere deep down in that tiny black heart of yours what it feels like to be desired."

I lean across the table, staring straight into his smoky eyes. "I don't have to wonder. You make it so obvious."

Lucien's eyes widen. A faint blush fuses his neck and cheeks. I recoil. Am I hallucinating? This is a first. I've never seen Luci blush in twelve years. I want to photograph his face, frame it, and hang it up on my bedroom wall. Not because I won this round, but because Luci looks adorable when he blushes.

Irresistible, my mind pulls that word out of a dark abyss.

No. That has to be an errant thought. Lucien Stone is the most snobbish, egoistic, arrogant know-it-all alive. There's nothing irresistible about him.

Plus, he can never match up to my standards.

I'm an incurable romantic, which means I can't stand anyone who can't match up to the standards of my ideal partner. I have a thirty-page long list for that, by the way. I'm not looking for long-term, but I'm also not interested in something that will leave me dissatisfied and feeling like men are all hopeless. I deserve my ideal version of romance and won't settle for anything less.

I steal a cookie from Lucien's spread. He's not going to eat all that anyway. He should be grateful I'm saving him from getting high cholesterol down the line.

"What happens to our competition now?" The crunch of the cookie being pulverized by my teeth punctuates the question. "There's nothing in this document about that. We can't openly compete at the hospital anymore or it'll rouse suspicion."

Lucien lowers his voice. "We'll stop competing, then."

Breaking news: Lucien has lost it. "Do you even realize what you're saying?" Crumbs go flying out of my mouth.

"What's so difficult about getting along, Mira?"

"How do you exactly propose we stop competing?" After more than a decade of fighting for superiority, does he think we can just stop? This isn't a tap that can be turned on and off at will.

“First, we’re not enemies,” Lucien says. “You don’t have to prove anything to me. Like I said, I don’t hate you. And neither of us got into medical school through connections.”

I clear my throat emphatically.

“I didn’t,” Lucien confirms, eyes narrowing. “But it’s up to you whether you choose to believe it or not.”

“Fine. So we’re both competent doctors who worked hard to get where we are. Then what?”

“That’s it.”

I pull a puzzled face. “Not sure I’m convinced.”

“If we’re not enemies and we’re both great surgeons, then it means I’m the same as our other colleagues. I don’t see you challenging Amanda and Amir or trying to outdo them. I’ll be another Amir to you starting now.”

“You’re nothing like Amir.”

“I’m straight, tall, dashing, competent. We’re similar enough.”

“He’s married,” I argue.

“He got married last year. Before that, he was just like me. And you still didn’t treat him like you treat me.”

Logically, this is correct. But it doesn’t compute in my mind that way. Amir is just Amir. He has always been Amir. If he were a flower, he’d be a daisy—bright and plain. And Amanda would be a rose—beautiful and romantic.

But Luci isn’t a flower. He could never be a flower because he’s the sun.

He burns my eyes and leaves me blind. It’s impossible not to notice or be awed by him. What I feel for him isn’t the pleasant, fleeting kind of appreciation I’d feel for a rose or a daisy.

I cannot ignore his existence or be chill about it.

Even if I’d met him for the first time during my fellowship, I wouldn’t have lumped him with everyone else.

I'm not sure why. There's something about him. Something out of the ordinary.

“So.” I fill my lungs with the delicious, tempting smell of coffee and treats. “You think you can treat me like Amanda starting tomorrow?”

“Well, not exactly like that since we're fake dating...” Lucien wipes his face with his hand. A multitude of expressions flits over his features, all pained. “Okay, it's impossible.”

“My point exactly.” I click my fingers. “We're not meant to be colleagues or friends.”

“No,” Lucien says wryly. “Just fake lovers. But for the upcoming trip, we need to get along or at least pretend.”

I throw up my hands. “I plan to be on my best behavior so you better not trigger me.”

Lucien scrunches his face in disgust. “I don't want to kiss you any more than you want to kiss me. So, I propose that we stick to only talking about the sights we see and the weather.”

Can't argue with that logic.

“Done,” I say.

We shake hands on that.

And I'm stupid enough to think that it'll all be this easy from now on.

TEN

Lucien

This is what pure torture looks like: arriving at the airport early to catch my flight to Niagara Falls, only to find that Mira beat me to it. Not only that, when I message Amir and Amanda, I realize they're traveling by road. So it'll be just Mira and me on the plane.

What a wonderful start to my weekend getaway.

"You're late." Mira hands me a cup of coffee—black with loads of sugar, just the way I like it. It's still hot. Practice makes perfect, I suppose. Though we started this new routine of buying drinks for each other every morning five days ago, it seems to have turned into a habit already.

"No, *you're* early," I retort. "They haven't even made the call for boarding yet."

"Waiting until the last minute isn't my style." Mira shrugs then shoves a white paper bag into my chest.

"What's this? Poison?" I study the bag. It smells...sweet and delicious. "You seem to have come up with the perfect plan to kill me even before we reach our destination."

"It's a donut, Luci." She fishes out a chocolate donut from the bottom of the bag as I take a sip of hot coffee, the taste hitting all the right spots in my brain. "You like sugary snacks, don't you?"

I nod. To say I love sweet things would be an understatement. Fried sugary snacks like donuts and churros are my favorite. But Mira's sudden niceness catches me off guard. Not only did she buy me coffee but also breakfast? What's happening here? Should I start preparing for the apocalypse?

"Since when did you become so generous?" I take a big bite of the donut. "Did an alien abduct you and swap your brain?"

"Don't flatter yourself. It's all so I don't have to kiss you," she replies.

I exhale at the same time as I finish eating my first donut. "Your loss."

A shadow of doubt flickers in the depths of her dark brown eyes but she doesn't snap back like she usually would. Wow. Color me surprised. She's really committed to being on her best behavior this weekend.

Why the hell does that make me feel oddly irritated?

I mean, I definitely appreciate the peace and the free food. I'm even gracious enough to admit that I appreciate her company.

Even so, my heart twists in my chest. Restless. Demanding. Greedy for something I can't have and should not even want in my right mind.

"Have you thought about where you'll work after we're finished with our fellowship?" Mira suddenly asks, leaning toward me, the V-cut of her T-shirt flopping to give me an eyeful of her cleavage.

No, I want to tell her. I'm too busy thinking about how much I'd like to put my hands on you.

Great. It's one thing to find my arch-nemesis hot, because Mira's definitely a beauty, objectively speaking. But it's quite another matter to be filming a porno featuring her in my head. Is there no end to how self-destructive I can be? I blame it on my mental state—my mind's still groggy from lack of sleep since I was ambitious enough to book an 8 am flight. I stuff

my unwanted appreciation of Mira's chest back into the dark place it originated from.

"What about you?" I ask instead, forcing my voice through the tight lump in my throat. "Have you decided?"

"I'm going to move back home," Mira says.

"Miss your mother?"

"Not really. But she needs me. My father died when I was a resident, and she's getting old and her job's tough on her health. I want her to be able to take it easy."

A silent heartbeat rolls between us.

"You're a good daughter." I wipe my lips and crystals of sugar stick to the back of my palm. It's amazing how exposed I felt complimenting her, how scared I am of having my intentions twisted around. When we're not constantly trying to cut each other down for no reason, we always end up being too intimate.

Mira's eyes go round and wide. Maybe she didn't expect me to compliment her.

A bitter, hollow laugh bubbles from her throat. "Not sure my mother would agree with you on that."

"Why not? You were there for your father's death, for his funeral. You're smart, talented..." *Beautiful*. I catch myself before I utter the last word. Because we have made a pact to be civil to each other, but that's more than civil. It's honest.

I suddenly recall her heartbroken, slumped back for weeks after her father died of cardiac arrest during our third year of residency. It hasn't been long since then and sometimes, when she sees other people with their fathers or patients who are around the same age as her dad, her eyes get glassy with tears. She thinks nobody sees, but I do. I suspect she still isn't entirely over it. Not that she'll tell me anything if I ask.

"No." Mira looks off into the distance beyond the glass walls of the airport where planes are taking off. "That's you, Luci. You're smart and talented. I'm just average. I only got so far because I pushed myself."

“So you’re finally admitting I’m smarter? Well, this trip has been totally worth my time already,” I tease, mostly because I don’t know how else to drive away the dark clouds that are haunting her eyes. Competitiveness is the only thing she responds to from me.

“Just because I’m not smart doesn’t mean I can’t be better than you.” There’s none of the usual bite in Mira’s voice. “You’re the hare and I’m the tortoise. I’ll still win in the end. Because I can work harder and stay the course longer than you.”

Before I can clap back that burning out is not a healthy way to win, the announcement for our flight echoes through the departure terminal. Mira comes to her feet instantly, gathering her handbag and tossing her finished cup of coffee in the trash.

She blazes ahead and I trot behind her. On the plane, after I’ve stowed away my carry-on luggage, I look out of the window of my window seat.

I’m not expecting Mira to glide over into the seat beside mine and plonk her ass on it.

My elbow is still halfway into her seat. I’m pretty territorial when it comes down to it. “Why’re you here?” I ask.

“Because this is my seat.” She shoves her ticket in my face.

The seat on the other side is taken by a middle-aged man and the plane is full, so there’s no way for me to exchange seats with anyone without looking like I’m deliberately avoiding her. That’d be too similar to admitting defeat, so I just stew in her presence. I’d have loved to have the old man up front sit next to me. But no. It has to be Mira because destiny loves to screw me, even over inconsequential things like seating arrangements.

After the requisite safety announcements and everything, the plane takes off and I shut my eyes, hoping I can fall asleep and forget about what awaits me on this vacation—and what doesn’t. But that’s an impossible task when Mira’s shifting

beside me every five seconds, her knees bumping against mine, the corners of her fingers brushing over my skin (since we share one armrest), and her lilting voice making conversation with the man in the aisle seat.

I give up and open my eyes in fifteen minutes.

“Did you bring a waterproof jacket? It’ll be cold at the falls,” I tell her, only because I worry for her safety and wellbeing and that middle-aged man is not shutting up about her vacation itinerary. Is he planning to stalk her or what? He’s showing far too much interest in her chest, even though she’s young enough to be his daughter. What’s with Mira and older men anyway?

“Of course I did,” she replies, her long ponytail swishing as she swivels back to me. “I’m not an idiot. I check the weather before going anywhere.”

I lean my head against the headrest. “Good to know. I was afraid you’d have forgotten; given the exciting week you’ve had.”

“Thanks to you,” Mira mutters but she’s frowning.

“For the record, I’m not happy about having to fake-date you, either.” I attempt to stretch my legs in front of me, but since this is a cheap flight, it’s very cramped. “It’s just awkward. I’m not saying you’re a terrible person, but we were enemies until yesterday and we’re supposed to suddenly start acting lovey-dovey today? Doesn’t that seem too ridiculous?”

Truth is, spending all this extra time with her is like being jerked back to the past I’ve tried to overcome for years. I’m afraid of what this could do to my carefully-built confidence. The most pervasive, haunting thought recently has been: I don’t deserve her and she knows it, too. It’s tiring to have to endure this entire ‘not good enough’, self-doubting phase all over again now that I’m thirty-four.

Her rejection broke my heart at sixteen. I’ve been through the self-hating spiral in high school already where I was in the pits for days after she tried to friend-zone me. At that time, I decided to not let Mira ever make me feel worse about myself

anymore. Every time I see her, my fragile ego breaks a bit more at the memory her past rejection and the way she constantly hints that I don't deserve my fellowship. That's why I need to always present my most confident, arrogant face in front of her so she can't grind my confidence into dust again. I need to make sure this 'fake dating' stays firmly in the fake territory because my mind's already confused and it's been, what, five days since we started this farce?

Mira sighs but it's a bone-deep sigh with no veiled sarcasm. She almost sounds like she's in pain. "Be glad it's just acting."

"It's still awkward." I wave my hand. "I just hope we don't have to go on any more trips together."

A note of irritation flickers in her dark brown eyes, and I want her to scream at me, douse my face with water from her mini bottle, take a cruel parting shot, poke me in the eye, something. But she lets it slide, closing her eyes and pressing her head back into the seat. I don't like this new version of her that's so passive and lets people walk all over her. This is not the Mira I know.

"You're going to be on call as soon as we go back." Mira crosses one leg over the other, eyes still closed. She's massaging her temples. "Enjoy all the rest you can get while we're upstate. I hope you booked yourself a luxurious five-star room with Mommy and Daddy's trust fund."

"I'm asking this because I'm genuinely interested, but how long are you going to keep hating me for something I can't change?" Shit. My tone's too defensive.

"What can't you change?"

"The fact that I am my parents' kid. The fact that they're successful and have money." I don't expect Mira to answer that. Even if she stopped resenting me for being born rich, what would it change? "Anyway, I didn't book anything with their money or mine. Amir said he'd take care of it."

"Amanda told me the same. Since I was on-call, I didn't have the brain space to deal with hotel bookings."

MIRA'S POLITE and nice façade cracks for one split second when she groans in disappointment. She probably realized we'll likely be staying at the same hotel. But she quickly reverts back to her new, amicable self. "Doesn't matter since we'll have separate rooms."

I fire a long sigh at the ceiling. "Thank god for that."

For the duration of the blissful car ride from the airport to our hotel where we're supposed to meet up with the rest of the gang, Mira and I grow comfortable with each other, thinking we'll only have to endure one another's presence during the sliver of time that we spend sightseeing with our colleagues.

The hotel, which is actually 4-star and plusher than I imagined, materializes out of a sea of glass-fronted buildings in downtown Buffalo. The lobby is a garden of brownish marble broken up by huge modern art sculptures. I spot a nice restaurant at the entrance and make a mental note to grab dinner there. I grew up on meals cooked by a professional chef so I have a refined palette. I'm tired of always eating fast and cheap food.

I briefly glance at Mira, as I tap my foot impatiently, waiting in line.

Mira's checking in, but from here, it looks more like she's flirting with Andrei, the guy at the front desk. He shakes his head apologetically and satisfaction jolts through me. She got rejected.

"Luci." She motions for me to come over.

I eagerly jaunt over to the front desk, the wheels of my luggage making rumbling noises against the hard floor.

“What’s the matter? Have you forgotten to read all of a sudden?”

Mira doesn’t even flinch at my barb. In fact, she looks like she’s seen a ghost. “They booked us one room.”

Panic leaches into my skin. “What do you mean?”

“It means we have to share a room.”

“It’s a deluxe double room with two beds and a view of the swimming pool,” Andrei interjects. “Both beds are queen size. I can assure you you’ll have plenty of space and a comfortable stay.”

I don’t give one hoot about a swimming pool in the middle of fucking February. And if I’m in the same room as Mira, it’s not the swimming pool I’m going to be looking at anyway.

“Can we um...un-book the room?” I stutter, so confused by this turn of events that I’ve forgotten proper English words.

“I’m very sorry,” Andrei interjects. “But I don’t understand what you mean.”

I grab my head. My heart is chewing through my flesh, threatening to flop on the floor at the mere thought of being stuck in the same room with Mira. I cannot imagine us coexisting in harmony. Knowing her, she’ll even turn going to the bathroom into some sort of competition.

“Are there any other rooms available?” Mira inquires, when I remain silent for too long.

It’s a great idea; I’ll give her that. I can book myself another room and assure myself peace and sanity for tonight.

Andrei, the bringer of doom, however, only has more bad news to give. “Unfortunately, we’re completely booked. No spare rooms unless someone cancels.”

An icy laugh shoots out of my mouth. What are the chances? Mira looks pale. She’s now searching on her phone to see what other hotels are close to this one. I’m one hundred percent certain Amanda and Amir planned this cheap ploy together, probably to spite us. Or for their own sadistic amusement.

“I’ll call Amanda first,” I say, tapping on her number.

The familiar, music-box tune of Amanda’s ringtone echoes through the lobby of the hotel. I pivot and lock eyes with the merry quartet striding across the lobby.

Speak of the devils and they’re here.

“Hey, guys, like our surprise?” Amanda waves to us. I’m guessing the petite woman with straight brown hair who has her arm linked with Amanda’s is Ruby, and the tall, olive-skinned woman wearing a navy headscarf walking in front of them is Sabiha, Amir’s wife.

Gotta admit; Ruby is much better looking in person than in their numerous weird selfies that I am treated to on a daily basis. She looks like an actual human when you take away the cat ears, fake blush, filters, and sparkly eyes effect.

It’s my first time seeing Sabiha in person, since Amir isn’t quite so vocal about his affection as Amanda, but Sabiha has the elegant, refined look of a born and bred socialite. Looking forward to bringing her up to date.

As I’m strategizing on whom to chew out first, Amir’s firm palm lands on my shoulder before I can finish my calculations.

“You have to get all the details right when you’re fake-dating,” he informs me. “Can’t have people suspecting you two of lying.”

I turn back, acid dripping from my voice. “I’m sure Dr. Burns won’t call and double-check every hotel in Buffalo in his spare time, and even if he did, they can’t divulge details about guests. So there’s no point to this.”

“We just couldn’t resist,” Amanda replies. “Personally, I don’t think there’s any danger of either of you jumping the other in the dead of the night, so I can’t see what’s the problem.”

I scrunch my lips. “That’s not even the issue—”

“You hate each other. And there are two beds. Think of it as your own private ‘bickering’ space. You can argue to your

heart's content and we won't be able to listen in or force you to pay the penalty."

The penalty. Kissing Mira. For an instant, that distracts me.

"This won't work. We'll kill each other by morning." I cock my head at Mira. "I'll find you another hotel."

"Ouch, that's mean. Asking the lady to leave." Amir claps a hand over his open mouth, aghast. I catch Sabiha snorting in laughter. "She's your girlfriend."

My *fake girlfriend*, I want to correct, but obviously, I'm smart enough not to say that out loud and invite more horrified stares from other people in line. Some of them are shaking their heads and whispering to their 'non-fake' partners about my boorish behavior. They're one step away from declaring me a villain. I admit; I do look like the world's biggest jerk right now from where they're standing.

Even Mira avoids looking at me directly, perfectly fitting the part of the 'girlfriend with the monster boyfriend'.

The universe is determined to screw me over today, isn't it?

"Lucien, you're being mean. You want to pay the penalty?" Amanda coos in my ear. She's enjoying herself way too much.

"I'm sorry." I curl and uncurl my fingers before succumbing and pressing a comforting hand on Mira's shoulder because I don't want this circus in the lobby to drag on forever. "You should stay here. I'll go somewhere else."

Apparently, that wasn't the right thing to say, either, because one of the other guests gasps out loud.

A smile plays on Amanda's lips. "I think you two should stay together and iron out your *issues*. That was the purpose of this vacation, no?"

A muscle jumps in my jaw. Amanda is going to milk every moment of my humiliation, isn't she?

"We don't have any issues," I retort.

“That’s not what it looks like.”

Andrei chooses this very moment to cough as if he’s agreeing with Amanda.

Mira tugs at my sleeve. Both of us stand in front of each other, unmoving. As much as I dislike Mira’s usually aloof and hostile expression, the mask of panicked embarrassment that she wears now is worse. My heart flinches in my chest. If I didn’t know better, I’d think she was hurt.

“That’s enough. I’m tired. I promise I won’t kill you and you’re not smart enough to kill me, so let’s just stop fighting and go to our room and find a solution in private. Okay? I’m not enjoying being a public spectacle.” Her tone is hard as stone. She sounds depleted. Probably an aftereffect of the long week we just had. Plus, she must be uncomfortable with all the attention we’re getting. I admit; it’s getting to me, too. I’d rather have this argument somewhere more private.

I growl, then produce my ID and check into the room with her. Andrei frowns when he hands me the room’s key card. Amanda fist-bumps Amir. They’re not going to win this one. Not on my watch.

I wheel away my luggage. Mira lags behind, walking slowly, struggling to hold onto her duffle bag which keeps weighing her down. It must be heavy.

“Give it to me.” I take the bag. “You look tired.”

She must be really wiped out because she doesn’t protest. Doesn’t bite my head off for my sexist chivalry or trying to act like a knight in shining armor the way she did during our morning run.

We ride up the elevator in uncharacteristic silence.

Is something wrong with her? She’s not talking at all. She has been like this all day and it’s bugging me.

I’m half-surprised she hasn’t turned our staying in the same room into a competition or taken any shots at me. ‘Afraid I’ll see your gross body hair and be scarred for life?’ ‘Can’t the great Lucien Stone handle sleeping in the same

room as a mere mortal woman?’ or even, ‘Afraid you’ll fall for me?’

I was totally expecting it to go that route. Seems like one week of fake dating has already made us more mature. I, for one, am glad, because I don’t want to get tangled up in another competition over nothing with this woman. That has pretty much been my life since sixteen.

The beige-carpeted hallway is quiet and empty except for the cleaning cart parked in the middle of it. I insert the card key into the door of our room and it clicks open. The deluxe room isn’t big at all. The two beds are separated by a single nightstand. There’s only one desk and a chair in the corner and a television screen opposite the bed. Looks like we’ll have to share a bathroom.

“Sorry for the spectacle downstairs. Don’t worry; I’ll find another place and get out of your hair soon,” I tell Mira, putting my luggage next to the bed nearest to the door and hers on the desk where she can reach easily.

“I—” She walks straight into the door. Her forehead bangs into the edge and she leaps back with a yowl, then pauses to rub her forehead. “It’s okay. It’s only one night.”

“We may live to irritate each other, but I don’t want to make you uncomfortable,” I say. “I’m aware of how much you hate me. Do you really want to spend hours cooped up with me in this room?”

There’s no fixed itinerary for this trip. Amanda said we’re supposed to go see the falls tomorrow morning and that’s it. I’m not sure how I’m going to kill time today, but I figured I’d stay in the hotel room and pig out on room service. And knowing Mira, she is too lazy and too much of an introvert to want to go out, either.

Which means we’ll be together all the time.

I pull out my phone and press search for hotels when a loud thud in the doorway startles me. I drop my phone.

“What the—” Turning my head, I find Mira collapsed in the doorway. My heartbeat totally dies for a second, before

starting back up at ten times the normal rate. A few terrifying medical scenarios crowd my mind at once—cardiac arrest (which I’m actually qualified to deal with), low blood pressure (also qualified), a stroke (again, cardiac expert here), blood clots, heart disease...the list goes on and on. But despite being an expert, the terror I feel is worse than an amateur handling their first case. This is not a hospital, and Mira’s not a patient. She’s someone who matters to me and in the face of her sudden collapse, I feel completely helpless.

In a single long stride, I’m kneeling beside her.

“Fuck.” My finger finds her pulse. It’s totally normal. Relief courses through my body from head to toe. Every second seems impossibly stressful as I press my hand against her chest to check if she squeals in pain. “Don’t die on me, Mira.”

Not when we just started fake-dating. She probably has no idea how much even fake-dating her means to me. It’s a lie but it feels great to have been moved out of Mira’s friend-zone temporarily.

“Don’t stress. I’m having a migraine, I think. I’ve had a throbbing headache all day, and it’s progressed to the point where I’m getting an aura now. Can’t make out anything clearly, not even your annoying face.” She lifts her head, then moans. “Can’t I just sleep on the floor?”

Lines are carved around her nose and mouth and on her forehead. She must be in pain. I can’t believe I didn’t notice the signs until now. Mira was acting so meek on the plane. And she seemed tired in the lobby. I should’ve figured something was up then.

Maybe she’s right. I’m far too self-absorbed for a doctor.

I’m not sure why I feel so...tender when I look at her, like someone is carving lines into my naked heart with a razorblade. Not sure why I feel protective toward her all of a sudden. Maybe because she bought me breakfast? Or because she saved me from certain career death by humiliating herself in front of everyone? I expected neither of those things from someone who has been vocal about her hatred toward me for

more than a decade. Mira had my back when I was in a tough spot. I'm realizing that I'm grateful to have a colleague like her.

"You can lie on the floor if you want," I tell her. "But as your fake boyfriend, I feel obligated to at least try and help you to the bed. If I may?"

She makes a weak sound which could be a no or a yes but I decide to interpret it as a yes.

Me helping her mostly consists of me just lifting her up and dropping her on the bed and her doing no work to even move a muscle. Which is fine with me. I don't expect patients to do anything except let me help them.

Mira feels light in my arms, the soft curves of her hips filling my palms. Something wells up my throat when she grabs the collar of my shirt suddenly, clinging to me. Her eyes open halfway, and though I know she can't see a thing clearly, her heavy-lidded gaze is so helpless it makes her look like a different person. I'm afraid I'll never un-see the way she looks in this moment—content and perfectly at home in my arms.

When her lips part, tension ratchets up my spine. It's perfectly quiet in this room. We've never had our skin directly touching each other for so long. It feels like some invisible barrier that was supposed to be my safety device has been compromised. I hold my breath. A thread of fear unfurls in my stomach but whatever I was worried she'd say, it's definitely not, "Go to the pharmacy and buy me some Aleve."

Not sure what I was expecting there. Maybe the heating blasting in the room is messing with my head. I should get some fresh air and clear my mind.

"Yes. I know. I know." I untangle her fingers from my clothes. "You just stay here and sleep. Lights off?"

"Yes, please."

"I'll be back soon." I squeeze her shoulder to reassure her. She closes her eyes, long, dark lashes delicately brushing the sweep of her prominent cheekbones. I've seen a lot of versions of Mira, but never the vulnerable version of her.

Something inside me reacts at seeing her so...unguarded. We've battled each other with words and grades and taunts for years, and while I remember every single victory and loss like a scar etched into my skin, I know next to nothing about her as a person. Her heartbreaks, her dreams, what she loves.

That's you, Luci. You're smart and talented. I'm just average.

Sometimes, I wish I could be you.

Something tells me she's not always the intelligent, brash, prideful person she pretends to be. That underneath the bold mask lies pain and self-doubt.

A moan drifts into my ears. Mira's small fingers bite into my wrists like blunt teeth. Her eyes fly open and they're filled with tears and pain and sadness.

My breath whittles down to nothing.

"Aleve PM," she says. "Can't sleep with this headache otherwise."

I detach her hand from me and place it at her side, drawing the comforter up to her neck. "Yeah, okay."

Call it stalking, observation, or whatever, but it's easy to see that Mira suffers from insomnia, especially when you consider how early she goes out for a run and how late the lights in her room wink off. It's not as though I watch her every day. I've just happened to see it a few times and I'm smart enough to add two and two together.

The frigid air outside the hotel that numbs my face is a welcome respite from the stuffy heat of my room. I stare at my ungloved hand, feeling like Mira's fingers are branded on my skin like a permanent tattoo. I can't forget the touch, even though it was just a meaningless contact.

I must be losing my mind. Things have been weird since the situation in the on-call room. I cannot fathom why I'm feeling so protective toward Mira all of a sudden. I wish more than anything else that we could go back to being a pain in each other's asses, metaphorically speaking. I'm not certain how to navigate these new waters with Mira, or what to do

when I see parts of her that make me feel all mushy. I can't afford to feel mushy toward my rival or my fake girlfriend. Because they're both going to destroy me.

The pharmacy is a short walk away. I buy her food along with the medicine because starving all night will only make Mira's situation worse and I'm not certain she can eat the elaborate room service meals.

Upon my return, she's still groaning, her features flashing pain and distress. She's curled up in a fetal position, a pillow clutched close to her body. Pitch darkness smothers the entire space but I turn on the lamp on the desk, which only casts mild light in the room.

"Get up and take this," I say, removing a bottle of water and the medicine from the plastic bag.

Mira makes a grunting noise and grips the pillow tighter. She's the kind of person who wants to be babied when she's sick, isn't she?

"Do you want me to help you?" I ask.

She acquiesces with a tiny nod.

I plant myself on one corner of the bed and pick her up, pulling her against my chest until her back lies snug against my chest. She opens her mouth, and I push one pill in, half-worried this might all be a trap and she'll bite my finger off the moment I give her a chance.

But she must be really sick because she lets the opportunity slip by.

"You need to be conscious for this part or you'll choke and die," I tell her. Her eyes fly open all of a sudden. She snatches the bottle from my hand and takes a large sip of water to wash down the tablet.

"You're a terrible doctor."

"No, I'm god's gift to the medical profession. And I helped you just now." I reach into the plastic bag and wave a banana nut muffin in front of her face. "Dinner?"

"Not now."

“Will I have to feed you that, too?”

“Depends on how I’m feeling.”

I heave an exasperated breath when her eyes flutter shut and her head burrows into the crook between my arm and chest comfortably. “How did you survive alone all this time?”

“You’re warm,” Mira mumbles, sounding equal parts awed and surprised. Her eyes are closed and she’s blabbering nonstop, her lips ghosting over my collarbone like feathers. “...And cuddly. You’ll make a nice pillow.”

“If you’re going to use my body as a bed, you need to be more lavish with your compliments,” I say dryly. But I don’t attempt to move her. I know this won’t last so I let it drag on as long as she’s being magnanimous.

“Luci, you’re soft. I was sure you wouldn’t be.” Mira’s mouth moves over the shell of my ear. A shiver rolls down my body. She’s so close. We’re skin to skin. The weird part is that I don’t have any urge to rip her off my body. Nor am I afraid of breaking out in rashes by coming in contact with my rival. If anything, I slide my arms up to her back until I’m holding her, too. And it feels like the easiest thing ever.

“Why not?” I ask.

“Because you’re a heartbreaker. And heartbreakers are made of stone.”

“No, they’re made of carbon and water like everybody else...” I cut myself off mid-sentence. “But whose heart did I break?”

She scrunches her eyelids. Breathes hard. “Mine.”

She’s rambling nonsense in the grip of a headache. That can be the only explanation. Because when and how could I have broken her heart? She has held me at arm’s length since the very first moment we met.

“You broke mine, too,” I say. “When you said you wanted to be friends in high school.”

I’ve tried to forget and stop being bitter about it. But at times when our gazes burn into each other across the operating

room, the awareness that I once saw her as actual girlfriend material pokes me somewhere deep in my subconscious.

I gently lay Mira back on the bed in a sleeping position, switch off the lamp and start reading on my Kindle. I can't leave her alone in case she needs something else so I scarf down my dinner consisting of store-bought blueberry muffins in the dark room while going over the finer details of a partial sternotomy.

A knock resounds in the room. Since I have nothing better to do, I answer it.

Amanda's dressed-up version greets me on the other side of the door. It has been at least two hours since I saw her and in that time, she has managed to slather her face with a shit ton of makeup, get into a red halter neck dress and blow dry her hair. She looks like a rich Chinese tourist planning to play at the casinos on the Canadian side of Niagara Falls.

She reaches out a hand to me. "We're all going to dinner at a fancy place. Thought I'd invite you both and hear about your solution regarding the one-room problem. Amir says he can find another room for you if you'd like."

"I'll pass," I grab the edge of the door, ready to slam it shut. "Already had dinner."

Amanda's brows smash together in a suspicious V. She gets on her tiptoes and sticks her head into the room. "Wow, I can't believe the lights are out already. Did you already kill her?"

"No, she's sleeping."

Amanda studies me carefully, more specifically my messy hair is and the jacket I'm now missing because I spilled water on it while trying to feed Mira.

"You guys slept together?" She whistles. "Is hate sex so good that you'd give up your opportunity to murder each other?"

"Get your mind out of the gutter. Mira has a migraine." When Amanda opens her mouth, I answer the as-yet-unasked

question. “I gave her medicine already. She’ll be fine tomorrow.”

“She’s sleeping?” Amanda asks.

I nod.

“So you’re not coming with us to dinner? She won’t go anywhere.”

“Come on, I’m not an asshole. I can’t leave her alone in this state.”

“I could watch over her,” Amanda offers.

“You and Amir should have fun with your spouses. I’m single anyway.”

“You’re not single.” Amanda points a finger at Mira’s crumpled, sleeping form under the comforter. “You’re her fake boyfriend.”

For the first time in my life, I don’t resist the words or try to deny them.

I lick my lips. “I guess I am.”

ELEVEN

Mira

I've never admitted this to anyone but sometimes I dream of Lucien. My dreams run the gamut from medieval-style guillotine executions where his severed head rolls down the stone platform like a perfectly bouncy volleyball to replicas of the BDSM scenes from erotica novels that I so love to read. But it's the romantic dreams that make my cells burn with agony. Because they're so him, yet so not him.

I've seen Lucien take care of people before. It's his job. And his bedside manner is pretty decent, even though he's a surgeon. But he has never cared for me in the same way.

Still, dreams are dreams. They're not supposed to be realistic. Just beautiful.

Tonight's dream is the worst of the bunch: Lucien's cradling me in his arms and feeding me small bites of a blueberry muffin. There's a comfy bed under me and a lit-up skyscape twinkles beyond wall-to-ceiling glass windows. No smell of antiseptic, no beeping of sirens, no blood and scrubs to be seen anywhere. That's a dead giveaway. It's definitely a dream.

His thumb sweeps across my bottom lip, rubbing away remnants of food. A frisson of warmth tickles my insides. I burrow deeper into his solid chest, purring like a kitten.

"You'll have to pay me back for this." His voice slithers into my ear, low and erotic. "And I'm going to make it

something you never forget.”

“Mmmmm.” I moan. “How?”

“Haven’t figured that out yet. I’m accepting suggestions.”

“Tie me up and make me beg. Or make me your sex slave for a day.”

A strong gust of wind hits my ear like he emptied out his entire lungs in a single breath. “You’re delirious.” I hear him swallow, registering the soft click of his teeth. “Or do you just like to talk dirty when you’re sick?”

Dream Lucien is being snarky today. He’s usually very gentlemanly. This version makes me uncomfortable because it’s too close to the truth, too close to being real. This is the version of him that broke my heart at sixteen.

“Don’t leave me,” I beg Dream Lucien, worried he’ll break my heart, too. “Even if this isn’t real.”

“You think this is a dream?” A cold, villainous laugh blasts my eardrums. Goosebumps pepper my hands. “Or are you too embarrassed to admit that you confessed to fantasizing about bondage with me?”

“I’m not embarrassed. In fact, if you only asked me once,” I say, all my reservations dissolved by the dreamlike haze that clouds my mind. “I would be yours.”

Lucien’s arms tighten under my breasts. My heart squeezes. Look at me spouting lines straight out of my favorite romance novels.

I hope my brain quickly switches to the guillotine dream again if only so I can have some solace while my head is threatening to splinter into two. I can’t take Dream Lucien’s silence after I just uttered the most ridiculous line ever.

After a while, my mind fades back into darkness. No voices. No faces. No feelings.

When my eyes snap open again, I’m back in the nice room with the soft bed and city view from floor-to-ceiling windows. But it’s no longer dark. The bright sunlight washes over my face, drawing luminous lines across my arms.

I'm tangled up in someone's limbs. Someone who doesn't shave their arms or legs. I jerk upright. There are only jagged pieces around me—hotel room, morning, warmth, two beds, a human lump. I'm unsure how they fit together. Lucien sleeping next to me. He's wearing clothes, thankfully and so am I. The room looks like a hotel room unless it's Lucien's apartment. I've never seen the inside of his studio, and I believe he has this kind of taste in interior design. But why would he have two beds?

A plastic wrapper catches at the edge of my vision. I tumble out of bed, scramble to the desk, and seize it. My heart grinds to a stop. I sniff blueberry muffins. There are crumbs left in the plastic wrapper.

That's when I realize.

It wasn't a dream.

Lucien doesn't talk about last night, which only worsens my anxiety. For my part, I refrain from asking why he was sleeping on my bed when there was a perfectly good empty one right next to it. I think I know the answer already.

While I'm brushing my teeth, memories filter back in slowly. I remember up until the part where we decided to stay in the same room. And the part where I went to sleep because I had a migraine. After that, everything's either fuzzy or so embarrassing I decide to write it off as a drug-induced hallucination.

After taking a shower (without fighting over who goes first), we head over to eat the hotel's buffet breakfast with Amanda, Ruby, Amir, and Sabiha. Amanda can't repress her smile even though nobody said anything funny.

"You look lovely," Amir's wife, Sabiha, remarks, nodding in admiration at my outfit—a white cashmere sweater, white

jeans, a golden brooch, and a camel-colored coat.

I went the extra mile today because I had this fleeting thought of competing with Luci for the best outfit but I dropped the idea the moment I stared at his gorgeous face and bare, sinuous chest straight out of the bathroom, his hips encased in a white towel. It was like a wet dream come to life. My words dried up and the insane stuff I said yesterday while I was delirious circled my brain like a raincloud.

I haven't been able to look him in the eye since.

"Thank you," I tell Sabiha as we take our seats beside our fake and real partners at the hotel's restaurant. "So do you."

She looks over my shoulder at Lucien, her perfectly threaded eyebrows crossing. "Um...why are you glaring at her?"

"Yeah," Amir echoes. "Why're you glaring at Mira like she stole your firstborn?"

"I'm not," Lucien growls. "This is a neutral look."

Amir chortles. "If I gave my wife that look, she'd poke me in the eye with the nearest fork."

"I will," Sabiha assures.

Fifty snarky comebacks are circling my brain but I don't dare utter a single one. Lucien's probably still irritated by what I did last night. I ruined his sleep and gave him mixed signals. I don't mind him stewing in anger, so as long as he keeps feigning amnesia.

"How's your migraine?" Ruby asks when we've all piled our plates with toasts, cereal, fruits, and assorted breakfast items. She has such a sweet, delicate voice, she sounds like a fairy.

I blink, reaching for the spoon on the table. "Oh, yeah, I'm fine."

"All thanks to your fake boyfriend." Amanda winks. "Lucien didn't leave your side for a single minute. He was so devoted. If I didn't know you two, I'd have mistaken you for a real couple."

Luci spits his cereal back into the bowl. The faces around the table all bear an amused expression as my muscles freeze.

“Stop with the bad jokes.” Lucien dabs his mouth with a napkin. “I don’t want the headache of being her actual boyfriend. Being her fake boyfriend is already a nightmare.”

My entire being deflates at his statement.

I’m not sure why his rejection stings so much. Well, at least I can be sure now that nothing has changed between us because of last night. Maybe it was a dream. Or maybe it was real and I turned him away with my terrible, overdramatic romantic lines. I’m sure he prefers someone who is upper class, rich, unromantic, and detached. I’m none of those.

I drop my fork on my plate. It makes a loud clattering sound. “The feeling’s mutual.”

Amir raises his hand, worry digging lines into his forehead. “Guys, watch it, Amanda was very disappointed by the lack of action yesterday.”

“Yeah, I would loooove to see you both kiss today,” Amanda says. “How about now?”

“No, thanks.” Lucien scoffs. “I don’t want to ruin my breakfast before I’ve seen the falls.”

“And I can’t afford another migraine right now,” I add.

“So what’s the schedule for today?” Ruby butts into the conversation and I’m grateful for her interruption.

Amanda’s focus quickly shifts from goading us to fawning over how pretty Ruby’s red dress looks on her. Sometimes, I envy people who are loved. How nice it must feel to be appreciated for small things like wearing a pretty dress in a flattering color. I have to work myself to the bone to hear anything good from my mother. And Lucien and Dr. Burns are the same. That’s why what Luci said yesterday caught me off guard.

You’re a good daughter.

He sounded so sincere. And though I’ve heard better things from patients and residents about my capabilities, what

he said meant more to me than anything anyone has ever said. I guess it's because we're rivals and I know Luci doesn't give praises freely.

"We're taking the Maid of the Mist boat tour in an hour. Amanda and I booked for everybody."

"How exciting." Sabiha claps her hands together. "We finally get to explore."

"Were you bored yesterday?" Amir asks her.

She shrugs. "No, but I want to do some sightseeing."

We munch through our breakfasts to the accompaniment of Amanda narrating the love story of Ruby and her. Lucien throws more than a few sidelong glances at me and I can't understand why. Is he trying to tell me something? What?

"I fell for her passion and drive," Ruby is saying now, feeding Amanda a watermelon piece skewered with the end of a fork. This couple is too much. "I've never met someone more devoted and romantic."

"How lovely to see such a happy couple," Sabiha manages.

"Maybe you should take notes, Mira and Lucien," Amir urges.

Luci gives him a dirty look. "For what?"

"So you can be a bit more convincing."

"Not all couples have to be over the top like them." He points to Amanda and Ruby who seem to be ensconced in their own imaginary bubble of love.

"People have their preferences." Sabiha acquiesces, watching Lucien very carefully. "You're the type who doesn't like to show affection."

"No, Luci's the type who isn't capable of emotion." I know I should hold my tongue, but I lash out nevertheless. I can't resist the opportunity to indirectly banter with Lucien, since I lost the courage to hurl insults directly to his face after last night's debacle. "He sold his heart to the devil in exchange

for the supernatural ability to annoy everyone he comes in contact with.”

Lucien tears off a piece of his toast. It hangs between his jaws as he lets out a long exhale. He angles his face toward me — throat flexing, pupils big black discs against the shocking blue of his irises. I immediately tip my chin downward and cast my gaze onto my purple trainers, tempted to run because I’m reminded of last night when those piercing eyes hovered over me in the darkness and how comfortable I felt cradled in his arms. How easily I spilled my embarrassing secrets and how much I longed for him to use them against me. Who’d have thought I’d feel so at ease in the arms of my arch-nemesis?

“Don’t let anybody hear you say you believe in Satan.” Lucien sneers. “It’ll discredit you as a doctor. I mean, how can someone who studied science be so irrational and superstitious?”

I don’t have a good answer to this. But thankfully, Ruby swoops to my rescue.

“I do hope both of you fall in love someday.” She considers Lucien and me in turns. “It’s a wonderful feeling and it changes your world.”

“That’s my darling.” Amanda curves her arm over Ruby’s shoulder. “Smart and philosophical. Though I fear her words are wasted on these two.”

“No, she’s right.” I bob my head up, dropping a weary sigh. “I wouldn’t mind some romance in my life—as long as it isn’t with Luci.”

This makes everybody at the table stare at me. Including Lucien.

I blink and shrink back into my chair, feeling like a politician who blabbered something offensive on stage and now has to face the wrath of the public.

“Am I still asleep?” Amanda asks. “Have you finally realized there’s more to life than competing with someone and plotting murder?”

I wipe my lips with a paper napkin. “Well, Lucien and I will be saying goodbye to each other in eight months so there’ll be no one to compete with anymore. Maybe I’ll try falling in love. It could be my new challenge.”

And it may be the challenge I most need to win. I’ve spent my entire life trying to match up to other people’s impossible standards so I could be loved. But despite trying my best, I sometimes feel I’m fighting a losing battle. That I’ll never be good enough to obtain the love of my mother or Lucien’s awe-struck admiration.

I always thought that if I beat Luci, there’ll be a big, juicy prize waiting at the end of it. Eternal admiration. I’ll always be put on a pedestal by someone. I’ll never have to feel ‘less than’ ever again. But our competition has drawn on for years without any end. And I may grow old by the time Lucien concedes defeat.

I know it won’t be easy, but I want what Amanda and Ruby have. I want to be appreciated for wearing a beautiful outfit, for smiling, for existing. I want someone to tell me I’m amazing for no reason, to look upon me tenderly, to remind me it’s okay to take it easy.

“I was thinking you’d be eager to work with me after graduation so you could see my splendid skills in action.” Lucien’s teeth are clenched. “Or are you scared of losing?”

Amanda and Amir fire twin sighs, muttering ‘not this again’.

“I’m not scared of losing,” I tell him. “I’m scared of ending up lonely and unhappy like you.”

Stunned silence envelops the table. Lucien’s face is a rigid sculpture. There’s only the sound of Sabiha’s robotic cereal munching to relieve the weight of my humiliation. I probably went too far with that one. Luci may be single right now, but that doesn’t mean he’s dissatisfied with life. He might have hobbies he’s invested in or maybe being the best is what makes him happy. I enjoy being a surgeon, too, and that’s the reason I don’t sink into an abyss of sorrow on a daily basis,

but sometimes, I want more. I need more, even if I'm afraid I'll never get it.

Lucien studies his empty plate. "I'm neither lonely nor unhappy."

Perhaps he isn't. He has women falling over him and loads of money. But I have nothing.

"Good for you, Luci." I drop my voice, so only he can hear the rest of my sentence. "You've managed to beat me at something."

After breakfast, we take a stroll by the hotel's swimming pool. All six of us. Where Amanda spontaneously decides to have a photoshoot for Lucien and me.

"This was the purpose of this trip," Amir says.

I just bite the bullet and decide to get it over with. I mean, I even created an Instagram account and followed Dr. Burns and half the hospital staff just so I could convince them of the ruse. Unless they see lovey-dovey pictures, I doubt they'll be convinced. Still, I'm apprehensive because once these pictures are out in cyberspace, I can never take them back.

I'll never be able to undo fake-dating Lucien Stone. Years later, if I'm fortunate enough to fall in love with someone wonderful, these pictures of our trip and other remnants of this (fake) relationship will haunt me forever.

Remember that time when you dated another fellow and got caught getting hot and steamy in the on-call room?

My face flames.

Fake dating is surprisingly close to real dating. I can't erase the past just because it was a deception. When we break up, Lucien will forever become my 'ex'. After years of

competing, we won't part ways as rivals, equals, or even colleagues. I doubt I'll be able to send him a wedding invite because how would I tell everyone that I'm inviting my ex to my wedding? It'll be awkward all around.

For the first time ever, I'm terrified of what lies at the end of our ruse.

"Can you at least look like you're not depressed?" Amanda says as she snaps pictures of us side by side on sun loungers. We look hella awkward sleeping there in jeans and jackets instead of swimwear. But whatever.

"Smile at the camera. And try to not make your disgust for each other so obvious. I can see the murderous glint in your eyes from five feet away." Amir instructs.

This pose is more awkward than the last. Lucien and I are holding each other by the pool, staring into each other's eyes lovingly. Or that was the idea. In reality, there's no way I can look at his face after what went down, so I keep my eyes level with his chin while acting like a shy schoolgirl. He's scowling at the top of my head. We definitely don't look like we're in love. Also, I realize we haven't come far since we were sixteen.

Sabiha may be right that people express affection in different ways, but whatever's seething between us isn't affection. I don't like how my body instinctively leans into his touch, craves it, and hopes for it. Finds it both comforting and exciting.

Lucien's hand resting at the curve of my back, inches from my ass, is burning a hole through my brain. That's one place I never thought he'd touch and the solid weight of his palm cupping my hips confuses my central nervous system. A spark buzzes under my skin, growing more noticeable every minute.

Thank goodness we soon move on to the group pic, where I'm standing next to Amanda.

Amir sends all of the pictures he took and we four fellows get busy uploading to our respective social media accounts.

I'm delighted to discover that Lucien has fewer followers than me on his Instagram account.

"Not for long," he mutters, noticing how I'm standing on my tiptoes and straining over his mountain-like shoulders for a view of his posts.

Obviously, we don't follow each other because have you ever met any rivals who follow each other on social media? That's for friends. Or actual lovers.

But Amanda puts me out of my misery.

"It'll look weird if you don't follow each other. You're supposed to be lovers. You should be liking and commenting fifteen heart emojis on every picture by your fake date."

Lucien's jaw sets in a mocking square. "Normal people don't do that."

Amir whistles. "Unfortunately, I'm here to tell you that normal people follow each other and comment on their partner's posts, too." He points to his wife, whose phone screen is turned to us with the list of people she follows. It includes her husband.

Then he shows his own phone where he has commented on Sabiha's latest post. I quickly follow Sabiha (I already follow Amir and Amanda) and find out that she owns an Etsy shop selling cute but modest clothing for women.

Despite my reluctance, I do follow Luci (even though he didn't follow me first) and comment on the picture he uploaded of us with:

Best trip ever. Love you soooo much, babe.

When he reads the comment, Lucien's eyebrows shoot up high and keep ascending on his forehead. I'm afraid they'll reach the sky soon.

"Babe?" He coughs.

"Unlike you, I'm actually trying."

"You call this trying?"

“Funny to hear that from someone who hasn’t commented on any of my posts yet.”

That shuts him up. He heaves a short breath, then begins to type. A minute later, I get a notification that all of my posts were liked and he has left heart emojis on all of them. Five per pic.

Great, now he has started using Instagram to annoy me. I hope I don’t develop hypertension while fake dating Lucien.

“It takes more creativity to write words than to spam heart emojis,” I chide.

“You just have to find fault in everything I do, don’t you?”

“I’m pushing you to be better. We must both do our best for this fake dating to work.”

Lucien drops his shoulders in defeat, then scrolls back through my Instagram. I populated it with some selfies last week to make it look more genuine. A few of them are really pretty if I say so myself.

Luci focuses intensely. I shift from one foot to another, curious what kind of nonsense he’ll come up with.

Probably something generic like ‘Gorgeous’ or ‘Beautiful’, but I’m not in the mood for bland generalizations. My blood’s on fire, and I want, I *need* something more from him. Even if it’s only so I can have a good laugh.

When he takes too long, panic stabs my chest. I hope he doesn’t attempt something cheeky like ‘That’s the smile my nightmares are made of’. Dr. Burns won’t understand Lucien’s sarcasm or appreciate it like I do.

Before I can warn him, I receive a comment on my selfie that knocks the earth from under my feet.

He left it on a pic of me during high school that I posted last week.

This was when I knew we were soulmates.

My heart does the most over dramatic flip-flop in my chest. Because that was the moment I knew, too. I yearned for

him so much when I was a teenager. Even when he rejected my friendship, I couldn't stop obsessing over him. My eyes locked onto him every time he was in the vicinity. I schemed ways to talk to him, to keep talking to him, to keep him in my life because not seeing him felt like missing a piece of my heart. So I taunted him because I knew being the best meant everything to him.

I told him I was going to NYU after school and that he better be prepared to lose to me.

He said, "Not in your wildest dreams."

We both went together. And have been together ever since, fighting a twisted, intense, never-ending battle. Sometimes, I'm almost happy because I get to see him every day.

Before I get anxious about losing everything when we graduate.

I know Lucien and I are nothing more than childish rivals. Our dynamic hasn't progressed since high school and I doubt it ever will. He'll never like me and even if that miracle occurs, we've distorted our relationship into something that can never become love.

So it's painful how much I want his comment to be more than a ploy for victory, to mean something, to be real. But nothing about us is real. We're fake lovers.

The worst part is, that's the most we've ever been.

TWELVE

Lucien

The Instagram comments spiral into a competition within minutes. If this contest had a title, it'd be 'Who can write the cheesiest romantic comments?'

Seems like yesterday when I fell madly in love with this handsome face.

Mira comments on a picture that was taken during my first year of medical school.

The opportunity to poke holes in her compliment is too good to pass up, so I reply with: *Just my face?*

Across the lobby, Mira's hunched over her phone. A trill of satisfaction rolls through me when I spy the corners of her eyes crinkling in frustration. But there's no hiding the reluctant smile that has bent her lips into a U. It's my win.

Until she replies, that is.

Face doesn't mean only the physical face, but also the 'face' you wear only for me.

It makes me feel exposed, that one. I know she doesn't mean it in this way, but I've never shown her anything but my most superficial side. My 'face', so to speak. I'm a master of hiding my feelings using banter. The very notion of sharing my honest thoughts with Mira is enough to send me into a cardiac arrest.

We know everything about each other except what matters. Sometimes, I wonder if we do these silly competitions because we're frustrated with the lies we tell every day and we need some way to relieve all the curiosity before it crushes us on the inside.

I don't dwell on the comment for long, though. Soon, I'm back in my stride, making her wince in defeat again.

Well, my allure is multilayered and all of it is at your disposal, my love.

Mira's lips are bleeding with how much she's biting them. The doctor in me wants to tell her to stop and wash the blood before the cut gets infected, but the hot-blooded male in me wants to bruise her lips even more with my kisses.

Sometimes my thoughts are so twisted, that I'm glad I don't have to ever share them with her. Or anyone, for that matter.

My Instagram lights up with the notification of another comment.

My dreams are made of these soulful blue eyes watching me.

Watching you do what, exactly? I fire back. I want to know the answer to that question. The real answer. But my chances of getting that are zero.

Her response appears instantly.

Everything.

My heart rate drops to zero. Well, metaphorically speaking. Scientifically, it wouldn't be possible for me to continue writing this if I were dead. The motes of light in the lobby sparkle like tiny crystals in my eyes. Breathlessness is defined as an unpleasant sensation of uncomfortable, rapid, or difficult breathing. That perfectly encapsulates my response.

I've lost. I've lost this silly Instagram contest already.

Not only that, but the events of yesterday that I've been trying to forget, but what she said last night bubbles up to the surface like a dead body that refuses to stay buried.

Tie me up and make me beg.

I've been doing my best to stuff her delirious episode in the depths of my mind, but it isn't easy to forget something so memorable, especially given all the X-rated roleplays I've conjured on the back of that statement. Her thin wrists caged by handcuffs. Her voice hoarse, begging me to make her come.

I'll forever be grateful for Mira's comment that yanks me away from my train of debauched fantasies. She has left something on my pic of me staring at the horizon after hiking up some trail that I can't remember.

Mira: Lost in thoughts. Are you thinking about me?

Lucien: You're always on my mind.

Mira quits and moves on to spamming smiley faces on another photo.

Who can write the most ridiculous romantic cheesy lines? I win that one.

Who can disguise their insults as compliments? Mira wins that one.

The game is addictive mostly because I'm convinced that it's forcing us to be honest for a change. I haven't written a single thing that isn't at least partially true and I have a feeling that's the case for her as well. It doesn't take a genius to figure out that Mira finds me attractive and always has. The way she becomes all quiet and freezes up when we're physically close is proof enough.

I'm humble enough to admit (at least inside my head) that I find Mira stunning. She's exactly my type, with her luscious, long raven black hair, dark eyes framed by darker lashes, legs for miles, and most of all, her brilliant mind which is a perfect match for mine. I mean, who else could I even have had this kind of fake Instagram comments battle with?

The loop of comments continues throughout the morning, though, getting more and more ludicrous by the second. The comments begin to get so over the top, Amir and Amanda tell us to stop because 'there ain't no way Dr. Burns will believe

that Mira and I think of each other as soulmates for life' and are planning to buy a love nest in the Bahamas when we graduate'.

"There's a limit to the suspension of disbelief," Amanda says.

"And this is way over that limit." Amir chortles when he reads the long conversations that we have been having on IG comments.

"Everybody expects you to break up the moment you finish your fellowships," Amanda says. "Of course, I'm rooting for you to stay together."

"As fake lovers?" Mira gags. "No, thanks. I'm not that desperate."

"You mean you aren't that lucky," I argue.

"Please get along for once, guys" Amir interjects. "I don't want to spend the boat ride listening to you argue."

"I'll behave." I bob my head toward Mira who seems to understand that I'm fishing for a silent agreement from her, too.

Ruby stretches her arms, realizing this entire thing is going nowhere. "We'll be late for our boat tour unless we get moving," she says.

Sabiha rotates on her heels. "I'll go get a waterproof jacket. Don't want to get wet."

Mira smooths her fingers over the fabric of her coat, sudden realization dawning. She was impractical in picking her outfit. I don't know who she was trying to impress by looking like an Instagram fashion influencer. But I was impressed nevertheless.

"I'll get my jacket, too." She jogs in the direction of the elevators.

And because I have nothing better to do, I follow.

THIRTEEN

Mira

“I’m not a baby,” I yell once Lucien and I are in the elevator. Thankfully, we’re alone so nobody is jarred by my banshee screaming. “I can find a jacket on my own.”

“I’ll just tag along to annoy you, then.” He sticks his hands into his pocket, but his expression is cautious. Like he’s expecting me to faint any minute.

Lucien’s lies don’t convince me. Nor do I like this new, overprotective side of him. Just because I collapsed on him yesterday doesn’t give him an excuse to treat me like a fragile doll. I hiss at him, hoping he’ll retreat, but I guess I forgot about his invulnerable self-assurance for a moment there.

“Don’t you have anything better to do?” I ask him as the elevator zips up, the digital floor numbers blurring.

Leaning effortlessly against the left wall, he resembles a model. “I can rearrange my schedule to accommodate you.”

“Aren’t you taking this fake dating too seriously?”

He shrugs. I must still be in a drug delirium after last night because even though it’s the most annoying shrug ever, I find it...sexy.

Once the elevator doors open, I storm across the hallway, hoping to outrun Luci. But all those morning runs have given him incredible thighs.

The door key clicks into place. I stomp into the room and attack my duffle bag. The sooner I get my jacket and run, the less I have to endure being in this room where the memories of last night wreath the air like a noxious plume of gas.

My throat is heavy with the weight of guilt and humiliation.

Lucien's presence sticks to me like sweat in summer. All my awareness rests on him hovering over me, the small sounds of his nails scraping against his jeans impatiently, as well as the fact that room service hasn't tidied up the bed yet. So the sheets lie in a messy sprawl, tracing the edges of our shapes, exactly as they were this morning.

Don't look, I tell myself.

A blue jacket sleeve sticks out from a corner when I open my luggage. The rest of it is buried underneath, but I don't have the patience to figure it out, so I use all my strength to yank it. In the process, a bunch of books I packed to read on this trip come flying out along with a few of my clothes. I gather the clothes quickly—nothing too embarrassing thankfully.

“What's this now?” I snap back at the teasing edge in Lucien's voice, an eerie sense of foreboding crawling up my spine.

His eyes are trained over my shoulder, where my entire stash of vacation erotica reads lies scattered on the floor, all the covers the right side up. A trail of fire sears through my body.

Kill me. Lucien Stone just laid eyes on my biggest secret. I try to ignore the fact that my heart is stomping in my chest like a monster unleashed as I briefly toy with the idea of pretend-fainting. Nah, Luci's a doctor. That'll never work. I settle for the more practical idea of retrieving all the books from the carpeted floor of the room and stuffing them back into my luggage. But it's too late.

“The virgin's submission,” Luci's drawl fills the room as he reads the titles one by one, stretching every syllable, his

enunciation making the books sound more sinful than they are. “Taken. Wrecked. Ruined by the Pirate Lord. The Viking’s Slave Girl.”

His left eyebrow arches high on the last one. I avert my face and wonder how much it’ll cost to get full-face plastic surgery, change my name, and move to another state. I could spontaneously combust from embarrassment right here and now. I utter useless prayers to the gods and goddesses, though certainly none of them are powerful enough to turn a situation of this magnitude around. I want to build a time machine and rewind to the moment before I hastily opened my luggage and ended up smack dab in the middle of *this*.

But since I created this mess, I’ll have to wriggle out of it using my brains. As always.

“Glad to know you can read,” I snap, but don’t hurry to pick up the fallen books. I need to play my cards very carefully here, or I’ll end up as the permanent target for Lucien’s jokes for the rest of my time as a fellow.

I school my features into a calm mask using every ounce of willpower that I possess.

Lucien kneels on the floor, presumably to help me retrieve the fallen books. A gasp tumbles out of his mouth when he picks up *Ruined by the Pirate Lord* and turns to the back cover. He quickly skims the content, which, I admit, is saucy.

“Erotica? Really?” He shakes his head with an exaggerated tongue click, but the smile playing at the corners of his eyes gives away how elated he is at having discovered my embarrassing secret.

I yank the book away from Lucien’s grip, nonplussed at having been discovered reading smut by my arch-rival. Internally, I’m embarrassed enough to explode right now, but if I act guilty in front of him, it’ll be his victory. Even if he thinks I’m a lonely, horny woman who seeks solace in kinky words written on dead trees, I need to act proud about it. He needs to see that I don’t have any insecurities he can prey upon. Nothing he can blackmail or manipulate me with.

Placing that book above the other three I've gathered, I throw him an irate look. "What I read is none of your business."

Lucien throws his hands up in surrender. Although I keep my eyes on the strings of letters in front of me, collecting the remaining books and returning them to my bag efficiently, I get the distinct feeling that he's staring at me.

"Lend it to me after you're done with it," he says after a while.

"You're going to read *erotica*?" I narrowly avoid screaming at the suggestion. "You?"

"Why not?" He makes a show of tapping his chest. "I need to stay in touch with my feminine side, don't I?"

I scoff. He should pull that bullshit on someone else. I'm not gonna believe for one second that he gives a rat's ass about his 'feminine side'.

"Why do I not believe you?"

"Fine, I'm curious about the kind of books women with no social life like to read." He tugs the front of his white puffer jacket nervously. "The fantasies of the delusional."

"Take that back."

I lunge for him, but he sails out of my reach. I swear, I should never have agreed to fake-date the jerk.

"Violence isn't the answer," Lucien says, planted beside the bed, wiggling his finger like a schoolteacher.

"Maybe it is." I make to tackle him, but as my hands are *this* close to clamping around his neck, he slides backward, hits his thighs against the bed, and falls on the mattress and messy sheets. I lose my balance and land on top of him—my curves against his hard planes, my face so close to his I can smell the aftershave, my lips a hair's breadth from touching his.

As Luci's attention wanders over my face, then my body, awareness stings me like a fresh bruise. A dark pleasure tightens at the bottom of my stomach, charging my skin with

an electric current. Shudders erupt from every point of contact between our bodies.

Something has been building up between the two of us forever. I only realize now that it's lust. And it's about to consume us right now, leaving only ashes in its wake.

Neither of us moves. We're locked in an intense staring match like we're afraid of what might happen if we make any sudden movements.

Everything about this moment is surreal. Sunlight illuminating his brilliant eyes. His hand bracketing my thighs. The urgent intimacy of the hotel bed. The wild desire to melt away, to give into him. My head feels woozy, like a champagne bottle about to spill over.

This is just like that time we almost kissed. Except, I don't think it will be an 'almost' this time.

He shifts his weight on top of mine, and the friction hits right between my legs. No way. I cannot, for goodness sake, be turned on by Lucien Stone right now.

A yelp escapes my throat. Kill me.

Amusement wrinkles the edges of Luci's eyes. "You look like you want to kiss me."

"You look like *you* want to kiss *me*," I counter.

"Don't project your desperation onto me."

Liar. His heartbeat is dancing a frantic tango under my chest. Mine's the drum solo of a hard metal song. Our breaths mingle together, and they're the only honest thing about us. The tension so thick I'll need a saw to cut through it. I'll take a complicated open-heart surgery over this any day.

"Desperate? Me? But I confess I've wondered..." I trail off, moistening my dry lips. "...what it'll be like to kiss an alligator."

Admitting that hurt more than a knife wound and it wasn't even the straightforward version of the truth. Being vulnerable and honest with the person who can rip my heart to shreds

feels like the worst form of self-mutilation. He could reject me right now.

“And I’ve wondered how it feels to kiss a venomous snake,” Lucien replies, his voice gentle enough to send shivers down my spine.

His hand settles on my shoulder, the U between his index finger and thumb curved around the base of my neck.

His gaze is dark and hungry and intense. My body reacts instantly. My nipples pebble into hard, aching points. Moisture soaks my panties. The sensitive spot between my legs pulses with pain and delicious friction when Lucien’s body moves over mine. The need thrumming low in my belly incinerates every last shred of my resistance.

Before I can get a grip on my common sense that has floated away into outer space, I blurt out, “Want to find out?”

Sometimes, I hate how alike we are. How much in sync. But at this moment, I love it. I love how we both move our heads at the same time, angling our lips so they fit perfectly.

There’s only a single, static-distorted noise in my head of blood pounding in my ears.

But it’s not loud enough to drown out the opening of the door or the cry of the maid as she whines in a high-pitched voice “Sorry, there was no sign on the door.”

I narrowly avoid strangling her. She’s lucky I’m in a good mood and I never take my anger out on housekeeping staff. Also, why did I not put the ‘Do Not Disturb’ sign on the door?

Lucien comes off the bed and basically picks me up and sets me upright and on the ground. He wipes his lips with his sleeve—the lips I didn’t even get to touch. He says, “No, please clean the room. We’re leaving,” to the maid.

Then he marches away.

My brain quickly scrambles. I don’t make a move, fiddling with the zipper of my Superdry windbreaker while the maid skewers me with a pitying look. I’ll let Luci gain a sizeable lead. I need him to be far, far away from me for the rest of this

trip. It would be a mess if we run into each other in the elevator. It's an enclosed space and if we're alone, I'm not sure what will happen. I might just maul his face.

Or rip his clothes off.

My skin's still on fire. Desire twists low in my belly, a painful, stabbing reminder of my humiliation.

It was just an inelegant brush of bodies. How could I be turned on by a kiss that didn't even happen? This is an overreaction.

The unexpended tension from earlier seethes in my bones like an undetonated hydrogen bomb. I'm afraid we can never undo what happened. It's going to haunt us until we finish what we started.

But if we finish what we started...nothing will be the same.

And if I give him a chance to get close to me, he'll definitely break my heart again.

FOURTEEN

Lucien

What the hell is going on?

My cock pulses, straining painfully against the zipper of my jeans. Low in my stomach, a heavy ache roars, resolute, and fuck me, I'm never going to make it through this.

I rushed out of the room fast enough that Mira couldn't catch a glimpse of the tent in my pants so I spared myself that humiliation, at least.

But this isn't much better—locked in a bathroom stall on the ground floor of the hotel, taking care of my monstrous erection. Jerking off to Mira like some sick, desperate teenage boy. I don't even have the luxury of a shower because the hotel maid appeared at the worst timing.

My mind's fogged up with vivid images that are as disturbing as they are intoxicating. I pump my hard length, imagining it's Mira's soft, luscious mouth that's licking the pre-cum from the tip. Her teeth graze my ears, her voice a quiet whisper reverberating down to my toes, "Come inside me, Luci."

It hurls me over the edge.

I groan, but that tiny little sound isn't adequate to convey the depth of my frustration.

I'm going straight to hell after this. If not to someplace worse. Like prison.

I admit I liked Mira when I was sixteen.

But that was puppy love. Young love. Sweet love. How did it turn into this rock-hard erection that refuses to be tamed?

Still wondering about what I'm going to do, I clean myself up. It's a wasted effort since I'm certain I'll get hard again the moment I see Mira in the lobby, her lips flushed from our almost-kiss, her large, innocent eyes begging for me to finish what we started. If it were any other woman, it'd have been easy to turn up my charm, pull out all the stops, and make them fall into my arms. I've done the drill enough times to be an expert at it.

But Mira's different.

My usual stratagems are of no help when it comes to her.

Because she hates me more than she detests losing. Though that didn't stop her from almost kissing me on the bed.

Hate's an aphrodisiac for some people, I guess. Personally, I'm not the type to want to screw someone I can't stand, because I'd rather not loathe myself after the deed.

But everybody's different.

Mira's hatred for me, the twisted game of dominance we play daily must have muddled her mind.

I can only hope it won't happen again, even though part of me is praying for the exact opposite.

I'm the last to show up to board the bus to the falls, but nobody asks me why. Thankfully, there's a vacant seat at the front, far, far away from Mira, and I occupy it without a second thought.

Trying to ignore Mira for the rest of the trip gives agony a new meaning, though.

She hovers in my peripheral vision, tempting me like the apple of Eden.

I don't think I was this stressed during my first big surgery. My heart rate hasn't been in the normal range since that

almost-kiss. The boat tour is a welcome reprieve because it means I don't have to interact with Mira and I can use that time to organize my thoughts.

My thoughts, however, refuse to be ordered.

I barely hear anything over the spray of water and the loud rush of the Niagara Falls echoing in my ears. The scenery is beautiful, though it's impossible to photograph because of how the high-velocity water striking the surface hurls droplets into my face every second.

It's my first time seeing the falls but I can barely focus. My parents weren't big believers in taking me on trips. All my vacations consisted of taking cello lessons and doing extracurricular activities that would look great on my college applications.

On Christmas and Thanksgiving, I visited Uncle Henry and Max and spent time with Ella. I looked forward to those.

Want to find out?

I shake my head. Wherever I turn, I see Mira's statement scrawled in neon lights. I can't believe what just happened. I can't believe what we did. And I can't believe how right it felt.

I can't stop thinking about everything else that I want to do with her mouth, her hair, breasts, her body.

My cock twitches. A familiar ache simmers low in my belly.

Oh, great.

Recently, I feel like I'm peeling back layers of her soul. I don't want to know so much about her because the more I know, the more I want to know. And that makes me afraid of falling for her again. I barely managed to get over her after high school. I'm not entering that purgatory of self-loathing again. She clearly doesn't like me. When she read my comment on her Instagram, she stood there frozen like an ice sculpture. It felt like someone had stuck a needle in my heart. After so many years of being colleagues, enduring harsh experiences together, crying to each other over the phone (while covering with banter) I expected...progress.

The boat tour is over in the blink of an eye. I spend most of it swimming in X-rated fantasies involving my rival. I can't wait to get back to work. Maybe I'll book an earlier flight back to New York. Tell everyone I'm sick. Because insanity is all that awaits me if I spend more time with Mira here. Insanity and something much, much worse.

"What's next?" Amir chirps, bouncing on his feet when we're off the boat.

Ruby looks through her phone. "Lunch, I suppose, though there's a few hours until then. We'll be heading back after that. I have work tomorrow."

"So do we," Amir adds.

"My flight's in the evening," Mira says. Her teeth are chattering. Her jacket is soaked and so is her hair. She barely got over a migraine but she's already on the fast track to catching a cold.

"Did something happen?" Amanda asks, rubbing together her cold hands, gaze bouncing between Mira and me. "You two have been very quiet."

"Just tired," I say. "I might head home sooner. I'm feeling a little under the weather."

Mira twirls a lock of her hair. "What a great idea."

Suspicion blooms on Amanda's face. "You just complimented him? Voluntarily?"

"I didn't compliment him," Mira defends herself, but nobody's listening.

It's a wordless walk back to the bus, and then the hotel. Every ounce of my self-control is invested in forcing my gaze to the ground. I even start counting the cracks.

Lunch should be a distraction, but before that, we'll have to spend hours locked together in the same room, so I decide to pull out my credit card and spring money on an earlier flight in an attempt to cut short my misery.

However, that doesn't pan out since all the flights are booked. I swear, my luck has been on a downward spiral

during this trip. I'm looking up private jet services when Amanda hops up like a baby monkey.

"Hey, let's play a game," she says. "It'll be fun."

"I need to leave," I tell her. "I don't have time for games."

"Yeah, Luci should go to the airport. We'll play the game by ourselves," Mira seconds.

Amir scratches his head. I can see the words circling the tip of his tongue, ready to materialize into the world. *What's up with you two?*

This level of agreeableness from Mira is a red flag. My quietness is a red flag. The fact that we haven't argued or indulged in any petty contest for hours is a red flag.

"You should go." Mira shoves the air in front of her, because she can't shove me. We can't risk any bodily contact after what happened. "Don't want to miss your flight."

"Are you that desperate to get rid of me?" It's supposed to be a jibe, my last-ditch attempt to restore our old dynamic, but it doesn't work. Because it oozes anger and sexual frustration. The low, savage rasp turns every head in the vicinity.

Mira slaps back with an equal measure of fire. "Can't you take a hint? I don't want to see your annoying face. Give me a break."

"You sure as hell don't want to see *something*." The insinuation strikes its target with precision, though the rest of our party is scratching their heads in confusion. "And I doubt it's my perfect face."

The lines of Mira's neck, her shoulders, and back stiffen. This isn't how she'd usually react. But what happened this morning has changed us and neither of us knows how to go back to the time when we were just rivals, when the air between us wasn't charged with volatile sexual tension, when every breath we drew didn't feel like a denial.

"Maybe you're the one compensating for *something*," Mira says. No humor, no teasing, just rage funneling through her throat.

I choke. “Me? You’re the one who is compensating for your insecurity by inventing stupid little contests you know you’ll lose. Come on, Mira, admit it. You know deep down that I am better than you. You’re jealous of me because you’ll never match up to me in anything. Why don’t you pick someone else to make you feel like you’re worthy of whatever it is you’re trying to be worthy of? Because I sure as hell am tired of your immature antics.”

Mira’s scowl deepens and she shifts on her legs, framing her body in an intimidating stance. She shoots me a look that would make mortal men cower in fear. Too bad I’m not at all bothered by her hostility so I stare down at her with an equally intimidating mouth twist.

“What about you, Lucien? You’re more immature than me. Have you ever thought about how callous you are to all the women whose time you waste? All for the sake of making yourself feel like you’re desirable. Like you’re a man. Under that ego, there’s only hot air. And you’re calling me insecure?”

“I have no reason to be insecure when it comes to women or sex. Unlike you.” I huff. “Be honest, when was the last time you even made skin to skin contact with a human being that wasn’t for work purposes?”

Mira’s face hardens until not a single muscle moves. I’m cornering her. I’m cornering her hard. She bites her bottom lip, stalling for a moment to find her bearings. “Not everybody measures their worth by the notches on their bedpost, Lucien. I’m proud to be single.”

It’s an indication to how far I’ve fallen that even this pointless, savage, insult-slinging turns me on.

Because god save me, I’m losing my mind over this woman.

“Guys, stop,” Amir pleads. “I don’t mind you two bantering but this is getting out of hand.”

“It’s not even entertaining,” Amanda adds. “And you’re always so entertaining.”

She’s right.

What happened to me? What happened to us?

We were supposed to duel until the end of time. I mean, we're still fighting, but it doesn't feel the same. It feels too much like actual anger, like bottled up sexual frustration, like old resentments rising to the surface, not the cool, intellectual mind game we usually play.

That almost-kiss changed everything between us. I'm no longer happy playing for low stakes. I want more. I need more.

My dick hardens again as everything that happened this weekend crashes into me like a delayed reaction—Mira cocooned in my arms, us sleeping on the same bed, the Instagram comments, the push and pull, the almost kiss spiraling down to an inevitable conclusion. A single desire burns through me like wildfire: *I don't want to go back to what we used to be*. And, then another, more immediate desire: I want to kiss her, to mark those lips with mine, leave them swollen so she'll never forget that for an intoxicating, unbelievable moment, we were more than rivals.

I'm good at playing twisted games. It's all I've done for years. So it isn't hard to bend the rules of this contest to my advantage.

My tongue scrambles for a savage one-liner, for a retort. I'm itching to pay the penalty. My mind whizzes and then I say it.

“Yeah?” I square my jaw, fizzing with irrational anger at what didn't happen that I cross the one line I told myself I wouldn't. “Then why do you read romance novels in secret and look like you're about to cry when you see Amanda and Ruby together? What's the point of complaining about being lonely when you were the one who walled yourself from everyone else? You say you're proud to be single, that you're alright, but you don't look alright to me. You look unhappy and terrified.”

“Terrified?” Mira's hands fly to her hips, resting against her curves. I really want her. Now. Naked. Against my body. Against my skin.

I also really want to win against her in whatever this pointless battle is that we're engaging in. So I focus.

"Yes. Terrified," I emphasize, feeling a frisson of pleasure as her eyes narrow. "Like you're afraid someone will figure out what you really are."

Mira angles her head forward. "And what am I?"

"A fucking liar." One who can't admit the truth that's heating up the space between us like a solar flare.

I snatch a quick breath as Mira stumbles backward. Got her, didn't I? Will it kill her to just admit that she wants me?

Amir steps between us, walling us off from each other. I guess even he's surprised by how low the blows have gone. "Okay, I was going to let your bickering slide, but that crossed the line. Guys, you'll have to pay the penalty."

His wife links her arms with his. "I agree with my husband on this one. I have been listening to you argue all morning."

"I'd like to see the end of this, even if the only way to get them to shut up is to have their mouths on each other's," Ruby agrees, throwing her hat into the ring.

Blood rises fast and hard in my chest, shooting to my neck, my cheeks, my head.

"With pleasure."

"What?" Mira flinches. "Luci..."

"It's just a kiss. But I guess it's a lot for you."

"Don't worry guys. Being mean is Lucien's middle name. I'm not offended." Mira waves her hands ineffectively at the others in our party, who look like they've reached the end of their rope with us. "But I can't believe you called me a liar."

"That's because you are one. And if I'm being too mean for our little princess." I gesture to Amanda. "I'm ready to pay the penalty."

Mira's face goes white as a sheet. Too bad she ended up falling into the trap of doing what she was trying to avoid.

She tugs at her hair like she's hoping a hole appears out of nowhere and swallows her up. "Don't be ridiculous."

"It's the rules," I say. "We play by the rules while we're here, right?"

"Yeah, actually, you do," Amanda replies. "What do you say, Amir?"

Mira telegraphs a worried expression to Amir, but he shakes his head. "I hate to see colleagues behave like this with each other. You two need to stop acting like children."

"Yeah, let's kiss and make up." I grin at Mira, knowing how much my flirty, casual smirk irritates her. "About time we populate our Instagram, too."

A hiss bursts from Mira. She grabs my shoulders violently, eyes two glowing balls of fire. "Luci, is everything a game to you?"

"As if you're any different." I dip my head lower, my jaw skimming her cheek until my mouth's only inches from her ear. "You're the one who made our fucking lives a competition."

"I..." She stammers.

"It's too late to quit now."

"I'm not quitting." She hesitates, before her hand shoots out and she grabs my collar, totally belligerent. "And don't get cocky."

I cup the back of her head, guiding her face closer to mine, equally hostile. This time, nothing stops our lips from meeting in a fierce kiss.

My eyelids seal shut. Her mouth sears mine like an open flame, suckling the bruised, broken edges of my teenage dreams. Lust licks its way up my throat and I squeeze the back of her neck, my tongue hungry for the taste of her mouth. A chaste kiss like this feels like a cop out.

But Amanda and Amir are watching. We've already gone far enough. I twist a wet strand of Mira's hair between my fingers, holding onto the feel of her for as long as I can.

Hoping I can drive her out of my mind and erase that one moment of heated intimacy that has been weighing me down like a boulder.

When our mouths separate, I expect all the remnants of the sexual tension lingering from that morning to disappear. Instead, my cock's hard as steel, and my fingers itch to caress her curves.

Fucking fantastic.

I ended a battle and started a war.

I'm half asleep outside Mira's co-op building when she arrives later that evening, duffle bag bouncing under her arms. Dark lines ring her eyes and her voice sounds tired when she greets the concierge. Glee injects itself into my veins. Good. I'm not the only one miserable after that lukewarm kiss. I'm not the only one who has been agonizing and brooding for the last few hours like the hero of some over dramatic gothic romance.

Mira's bottom lip drops a fraction and an audible gasp comes rushing out when she glides into the apartment building and spots me. Immediately, she scampers away to the elevators. Or tries to, before I block her path.

"What're you doing?" she says, her voice like barbed wire. She's either really mad or just as frustrated as I am. I'd put my money on number two.

I let the tension in my muscles bleed out, preparing myself to do what I've been mentally rehearsing for hours. It's strange how what was once the most embarrassing thing for me suddenly feels easy.

“I’m here to apologize,” I say. “For the terrible things I said to you. I didn’t mean any of it. I was just irritated. So forgive me?”

A sharp inhale. Her features mold into a mixture of scorn and disbelief. “Did you get this signed off by your ego? Because I’m not sure it can handle it.”

“It can handle it.” My fingers are deep in my pockets, my nails picking the stitches of the seam. Still, I can’t chase away the impulse to sink my fingers into the softness of her curves, to touch and devour every tantalizing inch of her body.

“How grown-up of you. I’m touched, Luci.” Mira creeps toward the elevator even while she’s talking and I follow because there’s no way it’s over just like this. Leaning against the side of the elevator, I cross my arms. This space is tiny, but I wouldn’t care if we did it here. My balls are about to explode from need and lust.

I grip the sides of my thighs. “And while I am still half crazy, I’d like to put it out there that I want to finish what we started.”

“We already finished what we started,” Mira says, then makes a kissy pout with her lips. “It was disgusting.”

“Come on.” I shoot my hand toward her, and when she doesn’t dodge, I skim my knuckles down the long column of her throat. Slowly. Sensually. “You know that isn’t what we started.”

The elevator beeps and stops at the eleventh floor. Mira staggers out ahead of me, then turns back and curves her finger at me.

“Come in, then.” The invitation, so casual and noncommittal, feels slippery like an eel in my hands. I could interpret that in a thousand different ways, but I need to know she means what I want her to mean—that we’ll be ending this today.

A thick, heavy silence writhes between us as Mira presses numbers on the keypad and I memorize her door code for no

reason except that I have a great memory and nothing else to focus my attention on.

Compared to the heating in the lobby, the inside of her apartment is cool.

It's the first time I've been inside her space. It feels like peering at an intimate part of her life I have no right to see. I scrutinize the studio, and I must say, I'm impressed. Mira actually made an effort to decorate her apartment which is a shock. Mine's better, of course, but I had the help of an interior designer and a cleaner who comes in every three days.

Hers isn't bad for a DIY project. I'd call the aesthetic Japandi. Japanese and Scandinavian elements fused together (also, everything looks like it was bought from IKEA.) Simple, wooden furniture, crisp white sheets, a few indoor plants, and mini terrariums to brighten up the brown and white color scheme. Easy, but it works.

"Wow, this is much better than the pigsty I expected," I remark.

That's high praise coming from me. She knows it, too.

"Thank you very much," she replies. "So what would you like?"

"I'm still waiting for your apology." The scratchiness in my throat grows worse when I realize I've said the wrong thing. The push and pull is driving me crazy. I want nothing more than to let the sparks flying between us catch fire and spiral into an inferno. But Mira looks reluctant and I don't like to touch reluctant women.

"Is that why you followed me inside?" She angles her head to the left and beams from her ceiling light sparkle inside her dark irises like crystals. God, she's so beautiful. "To hear me say that I was vicious for no reason and I'm sorry? Shall I make you a cup of coffee as an apology?"

"Is that why you invited me to your apartment?" I ask.

Mira stutters. I see the exact moment her walls come down and her resistance gives way to honesty.

“No.” Her voice is small and gentle. “It’s not.”

I slide my thumb under her chin and tip her face upward.
“Want to fuck me, then?”

“Do I have a choice?” She spits out a bitter chuckle.

“Yes, you do,” I inform her. “We both do. And I’m certain we’ll both make the worst possible decision.” We’re both losers. In fact, I’m certain this is no longer a game. I don’t know what it is.

Mira shakes her head. “That was a rhetorical question, Luci.”

Her hand fists in my shirt and she pulls me close. I seal the space between us with my body before Mira can change her mind, pinning her slender form against the wall. Then my mouth finds hers, possesses it until I’m devouring her.

Hungrily.

Angrily.

Violently.

It’s not enough. Years of craving condensed into a single, fragile moment. It’ll be over before I can blink. I can feel the end screaming in my ears with every flicker of her pulse.

My only consolation is that after this kiss, neither of us will be the same again.

FIFTEEN

Mira

The world is ending. Disbelief washes over me as my body is inundated by a slow, delicious heat. My mind spins like a merry-go-round and I want nothing more than to keep spinning, keep falling deeper and deeper into the dense gravity that has glued my feet to the ground.

Lucien presses his palm against the back of my head, curling his fingers into my hair as he claims me with his mouth and tongue and teeth.

He kisses with all the assurance of someone who knows he has won.

I can't stand how much I love it.

Hot desire licks its way up my body, throbbing in the sensitive spot between my legs. I've never felt anything so intense. So needy. So raw.

My heartbeat rings painfully in my ears, a reminder of the desire I cannot and must not have. Everything inside me seems to have frozen solid, my brain included. No thoughts. No witty jabs. No next move. I'm made up of only senses, melting into ecstasy.

I have taunted, defeated, goaded, threatened, but this time I've succeeded in doing the unimaginable: I've pushed Luci past his breaking point.

This is so wrong I tell myself. He's supposed to be my fake boyfriend.

It's Luci. His only redeeming quality is his face.

But when he breaks away, and the old distance rears its head between us, I cling to him, my arms over his shoulders, fingers clasped behind his head.

"Told you I was irresistible," he teases, fisting a hand in my hair and yanking. I can't get enough because it's rough and dominating and everything I've ever wanted.

I'm in pain and I'm in pleasure and I'm in a fantasy that I never want to leave.

"Screw you and your ego." The words mingle with intoxicated breaths. My last resistance.

Luci grabs my earlobe between his teeth and the pain sends a current of pleasure straight to my core. "Oh, I'll screw you alright. No need to be so impatient."

I claw his T-shirt. A warm shiver of ecstasy washes through me when he growls, pinning my wrists over my head. My mouth goes dry. I wriggle my body against him, but it's like trying to break a stone wall. He's solid and strong and those muscles aren't just for show.

My pussy throbs at my own helplessness, at how utterly happy I am to be held down by someone and ravished.

"You like this type of thing, don't you? You begged for it the other night." There's a flicker of uncertainty in Lucien's eyes and I'm surprised the great Lucien Stone actually has doubts about what he's doing. But I do appreciate that he cares to confirm what I want.

"Don't think I'm going to make it easy," I taunt, kneeling him in his shins, smirking as his lips curl in a wince.

"I don't like easy." One big, powerful hand grabs my thigh. Fire burns in his eyes, bright and sure, searing a trail through my flesh as his hand crawls under my skirt and his thumb grinds against my clit. Rough. Possessive. Unrelenting. Stars explode in my bloodstream.

I tug at his clothes, and he lets go of my wrist long enough to drag his T-shirt over his head. Then rips off my clothes.

My skirt. My blouse. My bra. My panties. Gone in an instant. Scorching heat envelops my body. My wrists are pinned over my head, held there by nothing except Lucien's commanding gaze. I eye the big, hard bulge at the front of his jeans. He's undoing the buttons now, grabbing a condom from his wallet first.

I gasp when his large, hard cock wrenches free. He's standing naked in front of me, looking every inch like a Greek God who is about to wreck my entire life. My pussy clenches in anticipation. Needing. Wanting. The desire to be broken by this infuriatingly stunning man.

"Close your mouth, Mira. I know I'm impressive but there's no need to gape," Lucien says when he catches me staring at him as he rolls on the condom. He's totally enjoying this. To my surprise, so am I.

His confidence is suddenly not irritating but...attractive. I want to go to the places he's promising, to be defiled and broken and reduced to ashes by that passionate gaze and wicked mouth and beautiful cock.

I swallow, then take a step forward.

"No." He wipes a hand over his wicked grin that's sexy as sin. "Don't move or I'll spank you so hard, you won't be able to sit for days."

A trill of excitement sings through my veins like a siren's song. A threat like that is too sweet to pass up.

Reaching forward with my hands, I tackle him onto the bed. Well, I live in a studio and there's only so much space.

A scream erupts from my throat when his hand slaps my ass cheek. Agony burns a trail through me. He wasn't kidding.

"Don't move," he repeats. His hand moves between my legs, thumb circling my clit as he dips his digits in and out of my wetness. "You're fucking soaked. You like being punished, don't you? Maybe I should do it again. Harder this time."

A sting erupts from my other ass cheek this time. And it only makes me wetter. I moan as his fingers fuck me, hard and rough and cruel. Like he wants to tear me apart. And all I can think is: *more, more, more. Don't stop. Crush me. Ruin me. Break me.*

“Does it hurt yet?” he whispers, but his arrogant smirk tells me he doesn't need an answer.

My limbs are jelly. There's no resistance left in me. I feel Lucien's control coiling around me like a physical thing. Every brush of his fingertips against my pussy releases a new torment. I'm one touch away from exploding. My thighs are slick with my wetness.

“Please...” My teeth grind in desperation.

My heart rate is an unsteady drumbeat in my ears. I scratch my nails on the sheets in frustration, too proud to beg him to go harder, faster, to push me past my limits.

“Get used to losing, Mira.” Luci's voice is a drug that I'll sell my soul to afford. “Because it's all going to be over for you soon.”

We're like fire and water, wind and earth. We're supposed to negate each other, not make each other burn brighter.

So what is this crazy chemical reaction?

Lucien flips me on my back in one easy motion and before I can blink, my legs are hooked over his shoulders and his cock is sliding inside me, filling me to the brim. He thrusts like he owns me, pinching my pebbled nipples, hitting me in the deepest, most sensitive spots every single time. So deep it hurts. So deep I never want it to end.

“Fuck. You're so tight.” Lucien growls. “I can't get enough of wrecking your pussy. It's like it was made for me.”

“Yes...I need...” I sound like I've forgotten to speak, and I don't even care.

“What do you need?” His face looms over me. Haloed by the ceiling light, he looks like an otherworldly being. Except for how his features are twisted into a mask of sadistic

pleasure. I'm at his mercy and there's nowhere else I'd rather be.

"You..." I breathe. My words are barely audible.

"You need me?" One eyebrow edges up on Luci's forehead. Sweat slicks his abs, his face, his neck. "To do what?"

In that moment I can't hold it in anymore. All the pent-up longing. The years of hatred and secret admiration and just pure, maddening tension that I always bottle up.

"Destroy...me," I beg. I want to be destroyed by him and him alone.

"With pleasure," Luci says.

He's sliding in and out of me like it's nothing for him. Ache gives way to gratification until I can't separate one sensation from the other.

I scream. Lucien's hand clamps over my mouth. "Not a sound," he says. "Or I stop."

I eject a helpless sigh.

I mean, I didn't come this far to bail out.

Spots dance in front of my eyes as he closes his hand over my throat, waiting for my reaction before tightening his grip. The ending is so close. I can taste it. My thoughts are floating away like kites in the sky.

"You feel fucking good," Lucien's pulse bleeds into me, or maybe it's my own that's rippling through my body like an electric wave. "Tell me I'm the best you've ever had."

"Arrogant...jerk..." I grit my teeth, my body failing to keep up with my mind.

"Tell me," he demands.

My willpower is a thin thread being frayed with every thrust. I feel my body dancing to his will, succumbing to his commands.

"You're the best," I give in.

A flash of satisfaction skitters across Luci's face. I hope I don't regret feeding his ego later.

"Glad to see we agree," he drawls, before sending me over the edge.

White-hot pleasure detonates in my body. Every thought turns to ashes, every nerve-ending set alight with ecstasy.

But Lucien doesn't stop. He keeps fucking me, dominating me, wringing every ounce of pleasure and pain I didn't think I was capable of until the first orgasm melts into another and another. Until his face is the only shape I remember, and his name is the only sound that comes out when I scream.

When he lets me go, we've both come multiple times and I'm boneless.

The sky is dark. His eyes are darker, as if he just realized what he did to me. As if he just realized that he showed me a side of him that he can't take back.

His weight peels off me. Even the last graze of his fingertips burns my skin like a live matchstick. I hear the crinkling of the condom as he gets rid of it. The scrape of his jeans button as he retrieves them from the hardwood floor.

Panic saws through the cloud of glee I've been floating on.

"No." A single syllable, tight with fear.

He stops, and angles his head backward. I'm not sure what I look like, but his eyes go wide.

"Come back," I plead. This is nothing like me. But my boundaries are weak after opening myself up to him. The sharp retorts and sassy comebacks are buried somewhere at the back of my throat, burned to ashes along with my other logical thoughts.

Luci doesn't object. He knows it'd be useless to take a stab at me after what we've done. After how intimate we've been with each other.

This tiny sliver of time is sacred, and neither of us will pollute it with lies or bravado.

My arms slither around him and I draw him close, kissing him.

The worst part is that he kisses me back, pulling me closer. Closer, until I am wrapped in his woodsy scent. Closer, until my skin feels like it's coated in him until my fingers are tangled in his hair.

“Don't leave,” I tell him. “Don't leave me.”

I don't have to explain why. He understands.

The post-orgasm glow gives way to the cold reality of early morning. Lucien stirs before me. I'm groggy and my head hurts. My alarm still hasn't gone off, so I stay in bed, pretending to be asleep. I did not bargain for the awkward morning after when I told him to stay over and not leave in the middle of the night. Clearly, my brain was addled by hormones.

Sadly, my house's a studio apartment, so there's nowhere to run. No way to escape the fact that he's here. My ears register Lucien sweeping his clothes off the floor where I threw them last night. He locks himself in the bathroom. Thankfully, the door isn't thin so I have no idea what he does inside. He could stuff a dead body in there and I would be none the wiser.

When he emerges a few minutes later, he pads over to the kitchen and opens the refrigerator. Must be hungry. We didn't even eat dinner yesterday. We were so busy fucking. His sigh, long and dry, spreads over the room like a perfume cloud. He must've glimpsed the sorry state of my fridge.

This is followed by the click of the door opening and closing.

I didn't realize how tightly coiled my muscles were until I let go of the tension the moment he vanishes. My eyes squeak open. I'm alone again, and I can finally breathe. There's no trace of light peeking from between the blinds. It must be some ungodly hour. Maybe Luci decided to spare us both the misery and leave early. I'm in no hurry to wake up and face him again at the hospital so I turn over and go back to sleep.

I'm woken up in a few minutes (or a few hours) later; I'm too disoriented to tell. Luci's back. He's stealthy but I'd know his silhouette in my dreams. Did he leave something? And did he memorize my passcode?

"You'd make a great criminal," I mutter, reaching to switch on the bedside lamp. Lucien beats me to it and switches on the light. I see brown Whole Foods bags piled on my minuscule kitchen counter.

"How do you feel?" he asks, seeing me sit up, and I almost melt at the tenderness in his tone.

"Okay," I mutter, sniffing the air. "Are you cooking?"

"Yeah. I'm hungry. And I bet you are, too."

I never say no to free food, not even from my arch-nemesis. Leaving Lucien to do the hard work, I glide into the bathroom to brush my teeth. I don't even bother looking at my face in the mirror. There's no point. I know I look horrifyingly happy and seeing myself like that is only going to make me worry about the time when my expression will be the exact opposite.

Still, being negative is not my style, so I decide to enjoy the last few moments of peace and calm before the dream fades away.

Remerging into my living room/kitchen/bedroom, I find Lucien working the toaster and flipping eggs. There's even some avocado mash looking all green and delicious in a bowl. The visual of him acting all domestic burns into my retinas. I don't even fight it. If you subtract his mean mouth and the heart that he sold to the devil, he's my ideal.

“Where did you find the eggs?” I take a seat at my two-seater dining table that’s littered with food crumbs. Not a pro at housecleaning, me.

Lucien’s head perks up. He smiles. It has the barest edge of glee. “Your fridge’s a wasteland, but I’m a superior fake boyfriend so I ran to the supermarket so you wouldn’t starve.”

That is almost...romantic. Not a mood I’ve ever considered I’d share with Luci. I shake my head. No way. What we did was a one-off, and no matter what has changed, this much I know: we’re still fake dating, and he’s still about to break my heart the moment he leaves my apartment. Because last night? It may have been just another notch on his bedpost, but it was everything to me. I’ve never experienced anything so amazing, not that I have many men to compare him to.

Perhaps many years later, when I’ve had a million sexual conquests, I’ll find him mediocre, but for now, he’s firmly at the top of the pyramid. And I’m certainly at the bottom of his rankings. He’s the type to rank women. I’m certain of it.

“I’m surprised you’re still here.” I scurry over to where he’s fluffing up scrambled eggs with a fork. “I thought you’d be off now that our one-night stand is over. Don’t remember you sticking around with anybody after you’ve done the deed.”

His spine goes stiff, and though the bright light flooding the room obscures my vision, I think I spot a muscle jump in his throat. “It wasn’t a one-night stand.”

I hate the hope that sparks immediately in my heart. “Uh-huh. Then what was it?”

“We’ll call it a teaser.”

“What’s next?” I snort. “The theatrical trailer?”

“I propose a long-term sexual arrangement.” He thrusts his fork in the air like he’s raising a toast. He has stopped cooking and is now watching me like the very breaths out of my nostrils are diamond dust.

My mouth hangs open. “Did you hit your head on my lamp last night?”

“I mean, think about it,” Luci continues. “It’s the perfect solution. We can’t see other people because of the rules of our fake dating contract. So this is the best option unless you want to become a nun.”

“I’m not going to be your booty call,” I snap, hurt for no reason. I can’t believe he sees me as nothing more than a convenient way to satisfy his sexual urges during our fake dating period. I refuse to be led into one more bad decision by his sweet words.

Not that I’m regretting the last one. But I’m definitely going to regret saying yes to being his six-month fuck buddy.

“So what do you want me to do?” he asks, slamming his hands on the kitchen counter. “Because I’m not backing down. We have great chemistry and it doesn’t hurt my ego to admit that it’s more than I’ve had with anyone else. I can recognize a good thing when I see it.”

My traitorous heart skips at that blatant cliché line.

I stop chewing the inside of my mouth. “I want romance.”

He looks at me like I sprouted horns. “With me?”

“With whoever I’m sleeping with. Or not sleeping with.”

“That’s your kink?”

“No, it’s what I deserve. Someone who makes me feel special and cherishes me.”

Lucien considers this while spreading avocado mash on toast.

“Okay. So I’ll be prince charming and you’ll let me fuck you. Deal?”

Trust Lucien Stone to make everything sound dry as ice. I don’t want another cold-blooded agreement written with my tears.

“Luci, this isn’t acing the ABSITE,” I say. “I’m not sure you’re capable of romance.”

“How would you know that?”

“Because you just bartered romantic gestures for sex.” A broad sweep of my hands. “The two should go together.”

“Clearly, they don’t for us.” Lucien takes a bite of the avocado toast, pushing a plate to the edge of the counter, challenging me to tell him he’s wrong.

I see he’s still being a jerk. But he’s a jerk who has logic on his side. There’s nothing more irritating in the world. I bite my nails, scraping my brain cells for a suitable comeback, but there isn’t any. I’m not entirely sure why I fell into his arms so easily. Except that I’ve liked him forever and our chemistry is unreal. Luci, however, must never find out my weakness. This arrangement is lopsided as it is.

“Fine,” I say. I hate the idea of exchanging romance for sex, but the only alternative is to pine for him quietly as I’ve done for years and that’s even worse. It’ll be a scandal if he ever catches me drooling over him. Which, after last night, I no longer trust myself not to do. Also, if he keeps watching me like he wants to devour me, it won’t take much for me to beg him to rip my shirt off. I’d rather be getting something out of it all.

“I have conditions,” I say. “First, you need to take me to nice places and treat me like I’m precious. One night of sex per date. As an added benefit, we can take pictures and post them on our social media. It’ll help our fake dating lie go a long way.”

I’d probably do the same if I were actually dating someone. Or so I tell myself.

“Candlelight dinners. Got it. I have money and taste so it won’t be a problem.” Lucien drums his fingertips on the edge of his plate. “Just don’t complain later if none of the other men you date ever match up to me.”

I rest my elbows on the dining table. “Don’t get too confident. You haven’t heard the rest of my conditions yet.”

“Flowers and expensive gifts, right? I know a place that delivers five hundred red roses. Shall I place an order?”

“Nope, no gifts for me. I mean, look at this place.” I circle my finger around my apartment. “Where would I fit five hundred red roses? Also, I don’t need any reminders of the fact that I...well, dated you.”

“You want this to be a secret?”

“Do you want the entire world to know that you’re buying me roses to get laid?”

Lucien’s face screws up. That’s more effective than any response.

I raise two fingers. “Second condition—you must shower me with praise for no reason. And it has to be nice praise not...well, the kind of compliments we usually give each other.”

“Demanding, much?”

“You can forget about the arrangement otherwise.” I tsk. “I’m sick of being criticized.”

“Is it romantic to be praised?”

“To me, yes. It means someone appreciates who I am.” I take a deep breath. “And don’t just focus on my accomplishments. Feel free to tell me how much my existence lights up your life.”

“Sure, like a cigarette lighter lights up a cigarette and gives you cancer in the process.”

I wring my hands in defeat. “You’re hopeless. Maybe you ought to practice. Try saying something nice to me.”

“You look like an abandoned puppy right now.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It’s a compliment,” Lucien informs me. “Puppies are cute.”

“But if I was cute, why would I be abandoned? Doesn’t abandonment suggest that nobody wanted me?”

“I guess you’re a cute thing nobody wants then.”

“Luci, that’s exactly what I told you to not do. You can’t give me compliments that double as insults. That defeats the purpose.”

“But—” Lucien scratches his jaw. I have a sudden flash of my tongue gliding over that jaw last night and it takes every bit of willpower not to do it again right now. “—taken another way, it means that you’re surrounded by heartless people who don’t realize your value. It’s not the puppy’s fault it’s abandoned. It’s still cute. Only unlucky.”

“So I’m unlucky?”

“Aren’t you? You said it yourself that you’re criticized all the time.”

Yes, that does seem to encapsulate my life. A cute puppy whose cuteness doesn’t melt anybody’s heart.

I can’t believe the puppy metaphor was so loaded with significance. It’s going to take a whole lot more brain cells than I have to decode the level of hidden meaning in Lucien’s casual compliments. I don’t have the patience for it.

“Never mind.” I clap my hands. “Just repeat after me: You are the most beautiful person I know.”

“You’re the most beautiful person I know.” It isn’t a flat statement, nor is it a passionate declaration. But it’s sincere. And the intensity with which Luci watches me throughout is more flattering than the compliment itself.

My heart feels like a fizzy cola about to explode out of its bottle. How unappreciated must I be that the simplest nice thing out of his mouth turns my head like this?

I gather myself quickly. “There. Did it hurt? Considering that was your first time.”

“If you only wanted to hear clichéd nonsense, you should’ve said that earlier. I thought you were expecting originality.”

I was, but Lucien’s originality is beyond the comprehension of most mortals.

Lucien taps his feet. The toaster chimes in time with his movement. He grabs two slices of toast and piles them on a plate, arranges eggs and spreads avocado mash, then slides it over the dining table toward me.

“Five stars for service,” I coo. “Will definitely visit again.”

Luci squints, but he doesn't look offended. He combs a hand through his hair, proud. “I'm good at everything. It's a flaw, honestly.”

“Except cooking.” I chew around the words. “These eggs taste like rubber.”

Luci grabs a fistful of his hair, looking irritated. I guess his ego can't handle it.

“Hey, can I have conditions, too?” he asks in a whisper, and the texture of his voice, so low and raspy, lights a fire between my legs.

Resistance wars with attraction. Not now. Not again. But I'm undone by his very existence so what are my chances of putting up a fight?

“What's your condition?” I ask.

“You'll praise me, too. I think romance should be a two-way street.”

And what do you know about romance? I want to snap. But he's right. Romance is a two-way street. Otherwise, it'll seem like he's a courtier singing praises of the queen. Not that I mind that dynamic. But 21st century democracy, equality, and liberty necessitate that I go with his suggestion.

“Fine. And here's my first compliment: you try hard.”

“That's what you say when there's nothing redeeming about a person,” Lucien informs.

“I mean, there's nothing redeeming about you.”

Except how he plays my body like a harp and hits all the right notes. And how I could banter with him for hours without getting bored. Or how he's good at taking care of sick

people. And making breakfast. And...okay, I must stop. Or I'll actually start liking him.

I clear my throat. "Condition three—"

"What next?" Lucien sighs into his breakfast. "You want my kidneys and my firstborn, too?"

"Don't be melodramatic." I pause to give him time to get over his unnecessary self-pity. "I want you to be honest. No lies."

"Apart from the bit where everything is a lie because we're fake lovers and I'm performing fake romantic gestures to get laid by my fake girlfriend?"

"Yes, apart from that bit. I don't want you to lie about important things to my face."

"Got it." Lucien gives a single, determined nod. "I'll lie behind your back."

"Not funny," I chide. "I'm sure you understand what I mean."

"Mira, have I ever lied to you?" His eyes are so open, so big, so engrossing that I want to believe him.

I release a low laugh. "The scary part is that I don't know if that's true or not."

Lucien blinks his eyes once, deliberately, and that's all the assurance I need. "All the other agreements of our rules still hold, okay? Don't fall in love with me when you realize what a perfect lover I am. Because it's all fake."

"I won't. I'm still sane." Now, more than ever, I know what I have to lose. "And we're not going to tell anyone about this. Especially not Amanda."

"Obviously. I won't even tell my parents."

I won't tell my mother, either. Not that she won't be overjoyed that I managed to snag a *hospital director's son aka future hospital director*, which is 'way better than that mushroom-faced, third-rate banker Suman aunty's daughter married'. She sings Luci's praises like he hung the moon. He

ticks all the boxes for the perfect husband: good looks, is nice to her, rich family, stable, high-paying job, and the number one wish list item of all Indian parents: he's a *doctor*.

Unlike many other people in the Indian community, my mother doesn't have a negative attitude toward me marrying someone from a different race. My parents may be first-generation immigrants, but they've tried their best to adapt to the life and culture here. She accepted that I would grow up in a diverse environment with 'foreigners' when she immigrated here.

She won't even care that Lucien has a sordid relationship history. Being a doctor forgives all his sins. No, I definitely cannot tell her or she'll start planning my big, fat, Indian wedding and mailing invites to our relatives back in Tamil Nadu. They'll probably land in New Jersey at the exact moment I break up with Luci. It'll be a disaster.

I shudder at the thought.

"So," Lucien stretches his hands over his head. "Are you free next Saturday?"

Next Saturday. That's when his week on-call ends.

"Sure. And I'm looking forward to something grand."

"I never disappoint."

SIXTEEN

Lucien

The next week is brutal. It seems as though all the emergencies in the state of New York are routed to the NYU Langone Medical Center. My eyes are red by day three, but I thrive on impossible challenges, so I take it all in stride. I hardly see Mira, though we do drink coffee together when we can. Actual conversation is scarce since we're too busy regaling people with tales of our supposedly magical trip to Niagara Falls.

"I saw the pictures. You two look so lovey-dovey," Ciara, an ER nurse, comments.

"Thanks," I reply.

"You two look close. Your worlds revolve around each other."

The instinct to protest rears its head, but it's hard to protest a fact. The fact is, I've been obsessing over Mira more than usual. I'm grateful for the variety of distractions because the last thing I want is for my mind to wander back to the sex I had with Mira and beg her for round two in the janitor closet.

I haven't had a second to think about what I'm going to do on Sunday. There are only three days left.

I know Mira has high expectations and never before have I been so afraid of disappointing someone.

Can I do anything that'll meet her standards?

My angioplasty procedure ends at 2:45 pm, just in time for a lunch break. I don't have any other surgeries scheduled until 4 pm. I rub my tired eyes and head out to grab food. I already gobbled down the packed lunch made by my parents' housekeeper, who usually delivers them to me the week I'm on call. It's actually pretty convenient. But I'm ravenous today, the result of consecutive sleepless nights, so I'm eating like a machine.

The moment I hit the road, cabs honk in my ears. Sounds creep up on me like bugs crawling into my ears, layer upon layer of traffic noises. Among those I pick up an unexpected one—the ringing of my phone.

“Max?” I cough into the phone, adjusting to the delicious smoky smell from a falafel food cart where I promptly head to place my order. “Didn't expect you to call me in the middle of the day. Don't you have to be at a photoshoot or something?”

“I'm on a break, getting my makeup done,” my aunt replies. “Anyway, I just wanted to officially invite you to Henry's birthday on March 18th. It'll be at the Ritz-Carlton like always. This year, I'm planning a black, gold, and white theme so wear something in those colors. I've mailed you the invitation already but last time you forgot to check your mail so I thought I'd call you.”

“Sure, I'll be there.” I agree automatically. I go every year, anyway. Max would be heartbroken if I didn't come. “Are my parents invited, too?”

“Of course. And so is your girlfriend.”

Surprise drives the words out of my mouth. “My what?”

“Your girlfriend. Your social media has been blowing up with photos of her. And Ella said she saw you together at dinner that day.”

Of course my bookish, introverted cousin has inherited her mother's penchant for gossip.

“We're not—” I'm stopped from blowing my fake dating cover by the falafel truck vendor thrusting a wrap at my face.

Just in the nick of time, too. “Thanks, buddy,” I say, handing him the money.

“You’re not dating?” Max badgers, unwilling to let the topic go.

“It’s complicated.”

“Oooh, I’m all ears. I love complicated relationships.”

I bite into my falafel wrap, debating over whether it’s a good idea to tell Max the truth. Max is terrible at giving love advice, but I trust her and she’s the only one who has cared for me. So she should know. Besides, the secret’s burning a hole through my tongue. “Look, Max, you’re the only person in the world I know who can understand this, because your life’s been more fantastical than mine. But don’t tell my parents. Or anyone. I don’t want this to turn into tabloid gossip.”

A snort. “You’re not famous enough for the tabloids to care about you.”

“Am I not your darling nephew? And are you not the most famous actress ever? Put two and two together—”

“Okay...fine, I swear I won’t tell anyone but Henry.” Max’s breathing fast. She’s way too excited about my love life. “And you know he doesn’t have any friends other than me. So it’ll be between the two of us.”

“I’m pretending to date my colleague. And she’s also pretending to date me.”

“For real?”

“For real.” I proceed to give her a quick rundown of the events in the fellow room with Dr. Burns. It all sounds rather ridiculous and convoluted in broad daylight. I can’t imagine how we ended up doing it. But given the progress I’ve made with Mira, even if it’s a lie, I don’t want to stop.

“Wow,” Max says at the end of my story. “Can I get a role in this movie? It sounds like a comedy of errors.”

My thumb burrows into my temple. “What role would you like?”

“The fairy godmother aunt who makes the couple realize they’re in love.”

“Unfortunately, that role was deleted from the script ages ago,” I say. “So, bad luck. Besides, we’re not going to fall in love with each other. We’ve been enemies since high school.”

“Mira? That’s her name?”

“Yes. She’s Indian-American.”

“I’d like to meet her.”

“Won’t happen.”

“Why not? Ella likes her. Said she has a great sense of humor. I’ll even exempt her from the dress code.”

“She’s not comfortable around rich people. And she might not want to...um...meet my parents. Who will also be present at the party. Since we’re fake dating. And it’ll be awkward.”

“Well, you’re persuasive so I’m sure you can convince her. Remember you once convinced me to spend my monthly paycheck on a curtain.”

“Not everybody is as gullible as you were, Max.”

“Please. Please. I want to meet this angel who has the patience to put up with you.”

“You can’t. Not yet. We’re still...new.”

Max draws a long breath, but people talking around her drown out her words. I catch the phrases ‘time for the shoot’ and ‘I’m ready’ before silence streams into my ears. Seems like being a legend is hard work.

When I get back to the hospital, there’s still a bit of free time left. As a courtesy, I try to find my fake girlfriend to convey Max’s party invitation to her, but she’s MIA.

“Haven’t seen her recently,” Amanda replies when I ask her. “But I’m happy to keep you company and show you some pictures of Ruby and me. The Niagara pics are so cute.”

“I’m not the cheating type, so no.” More importantly, I don’t want to listen to Amanda fawning over Ruby for the

millionth time.

Amanda pulls her lips into a frown. “And I’m lesbian.”

“Sorry. My girlfriend’s the jealous type. She’ll misunderstand.” The words roll off my tongue too easily and the worst part is, I don’t even realize I made a mistake until Amanda points it out.

“You mean your *fake* girlfriend?”

“Shhh. We’re at the hospital. The walls have ears here.”

“Look at you.” She smacks her chin. “You’re a pro at this already.”

She has no idea. I’ve become more than a pro. I’ve almost become a real boyfriend, which was not the purpose of this agreement, though I can’t say it bothers me as much as I thought it would. I can’t remember the last time I felt so nervous about impressing someone. The last time I took care of someone, cuddled with them, or took a trip with them. I’m not commitment-phobic but I’ve never had the time or inclination to sweep someone off their feet.

Maybe I’m going to need lessons at this. And who better than the queen of romance herself?

I bite the bullet and clear my throat, combing my fingers through my hair. “What’s the most romantic thing you’ve done for Ruby?”

A sly smile slants the corners of Amanda’s mouth. “Oh? Did something happen?” Her voice drips with honey and silent knowledge. “You’re being unusually proactive.”

Heat leaks through the pores on my face. My legs feel constricted in my scrubs, my shirt suddenly too tight to contain my expanding chest. After years of being a cold genius, I don’t want my colleagues to think that I’m turning into a mushy romantic. Maybe this was a bad idea.

“It’s for the next phase of the fake dating plan,” I explain. I may or may not be a pro at being a fake boyfriend, but I’m definitely a pro at twisting the truth to portray the image I

want. “We took a short trip together, so I’m wondering what comes next.”

Amanda closes her eyes like she’s trying to remember. The rising tide of voices in the hospital swells and flattens around us.

“I once took Ruby on a surprise vacation to Paris.” Her dark brown eyes soften at the memory. “Blew all my savings on that one. I still have the pictures if you want to see them.”

I don’t try to wriggle my way out of it. I’m curious, actually, to see how Amanda looked when she was younger. I wind my way beside Amanda and glance at the reel of images she scrolls through on her phone, of two women hugging and kissing and looking enviously happy in front of the Eiffel Tower. Two lovers walking hand in hand along the Seine, in matching trench coats.

It’s like a picture postcard, like an oil painting meant to be framed. This could never be me. I don’t even enjoy long plane rides. Nor do I know anyone whose love story is so cinematic.

It cannot be real.

Reality looks like my parents. We have enough foreign vacation pictures to build a house with, and in all of them, Mom and Dad standing shoulder-to-shoulder, fake smiles drilled into their faces, while internally cursing each other. Maybe Amanda and Ruby aren’t faking it, but how long will it last?

“Looks like a lot of effort.” I groan, but it sounds like a whine. “And I’m sure Mira will reject it out of hand. She’s a penny pincher if ever there was one.”

“That’s because neither of you likes traveling.” Amanda, shockingly, powers off her phone screen. Gives up a golden opportunity to bore me with more selfies. And I wouldn’t even have minded. “Paris was romantic because Ruby always wanted to go. It wouldn’t be the same if I went with someone else. Maybe you should find something you both enjoy.”

“Surgery?” I venture.

Amanda facepalms. “Please tell me you have actual hobbies.”

I don’t. Not unless hooking up with random women and writing research papers is a hobby. I guess there’s running. Mira and I already do that together, though, and I can’t find a way to put a romantic spin on it. A sudden shard of memory pokes through my consciousness—the books. I recall the colorful covers scattered across the beige carpet—of brawny, bare-chested men and pale, delicate women wrapped in their embrace.

Mira likes to read explicitly-titled porn novels.

Evil delight tears through me as I plot all the ways I can use that intel to gain the upper hand—then I suddenly remember that isn’t the purpose.

The purpose is to do something nice. But why does being nice feel like letting my guard down, feel like I’m throwing my naked heart to the wolves to rip apart?

Nothing I do for Mira could ever be just an act. There’s too much between us for that. Too many years of obsession and hate and mistakes.

Maybe I should rethink this whole romantic gesture thing. If only the sex wasn’t too good to give up. Not to mention the fact that we’ve finally made some progress on our relationship with each other after sixteen fucking years. It feels like winning a gold medal at the Olympics.

“Say, what’s the most romantic thing Ruby has ever done for you?” I ask because I don’t want to go through the effort of buying a million romance novels only to have them thrown back in my face with a side of cruel laughter.

Amanda replies instantly as if the answer was already at the tip of her tongue even before she heard my question. “Told me that she loves me.”

The room grows brighter, a stray light beam arrowing into my left eye. I’ve always thought of myself as cynical and jaded. I lost all my rose-tinted optimism when Mira coldly rejected me and my first crush ended in heartbreak. It was my

wake-up call, my passage into adulthood. So it's shocking that Ruby's words make me blush.

"Wouldn't mean the same if it was a lie," I mutter under my breath.

"True," Amanda agrees. "I hope you figure this out, Lucien. Or I can always start organizing a fake breakup party for you two."

I pause, not sure I heard correctly. "There are fake breakup parties?"

"The world is more diverse than you imagine."

Five minutes of my precious lunch hour have flown by already, so instead of falling down the rabbit hole of fake dating culture with Amanda, I excuse myself. Cutting straight through the lobby, I spy Joe the Mafioso chatting with someone on the phone. From the way he grins, I'll hazard a guess that it's his mistress. Joe seems like such a dedicated lover.

I brush past him all casual-like, throwing a casual hello in his direction. He peels his mobile phone from his ear and glowers at me.

Tony is being sent home today so it's the last time I'll get to see Joe. Though our friendship is still underdeveloped, we've gotten to the stage where we can look each other in the eye without Joe threatening me with torture. I call that progress.

"You're not with that girl?" he inquires.

I gasp dramatically. "Look at that—you, talking to me voluntarily."

He shrugs. "Just thought she looked like she was in trouble. But I suppose you'll only make the situation worse."

All the mirth in my system dissolves at those words. That statement feels like a bucket of cold water thrown at my face.

"What do you mean?" I say. "When did you see Mira?"

“Just now.” Joe gestures at the large windows, to the street beyond.

I sprint over, my heart sliding up to my throat like bad acid reflux. Under me, in the shade of a pillar, I spot Mira standing with a wiry guy in ripped, baggy jeans who, despite the clean NYU sweatshirt he’s wearing, looks very much like a gang member. Doesn’t help that he’s leering at my girlfriend. I mean, my fake girlfriend. His hair’s windblown, his features an odd mixture of youth and bad decisions. Full lips, scars, a clean-shaven jaw, a crooked nose that tells the tale of a fistfight gone wrong.

As I’m trying to slot the pieces of the puzzle together from my high vantage point, he advances on Mira, a lewd expression fixed on his face. Mira steps back in small increments, her lips moving animatedly, her hands shoving him away. He grabs her wrists.

Rage rattles in my chest like pennies in an empty jar. Icy panic freezes my veins. This doesn’t look good. I bound down the emergency stairs, a variety of terrible images unspooling inside my brain.

My fists are already curling in anticipation of connecting with the jerk’s oily face. My heart leaps at the sound of the satisfying crunch of his bones. Being close to Mira awakens some sick, desperate monster inside me. This isn’t the first time I’ve been incited to violence by the mere fact that she’s in the presence of a guy, but given the situation, I have a good reason to be livid.

By the time I get to the scene, though, Mira beats me to it.

She shoves the guy back, screaming, “Get lost.”

He doesn’t even stumble. His teeth arrange into a predatory smile. “Playing hard to get doesn’t suit you.”

Fire roars in my veins and I barrel toward him, vibrating with the intense and singular desire to break all his bones. Every sensible thought flees my head, and I don’t give a damn about the fact that I’m at a hospital, I’m a doctor, and my job

involves healing people, not hurting them. Because that jerk? He's misbehaving with my girl.

"I'm not interested in you." Mira slides her hands into the pockets of her white coat. "And this is my workplace. You're not welcome here."

"Come on. You've welcomed me to more intimate places."

My jaw tightens at his crudeness. His behavior is inexcusable, not to mention predatory.

Mira suddenly catches me at the periphery of her vision, angles her head and when she realizes I just witnessed everything, she drops a huge sigh. She scurries up to Douchebag and nudges him. "I'm over you. Please leave."

But instead of getting the message like a decent human being, Douchebag justifies his nickname by grabbing Mira's hand. She breaks his hold easily.

"This is sexual harassment. And I'm calling the police." She digs out her phone and is about to dial.

And that's when he pushes her and grabs her ass.

I see red and my body moves on its own. I've never had a deeper and more urgent instinct to protect anyone or anything.

Before I can fully realize the scale of my anger, my fingers are curled around Douchebag's throat, and he's on his back on the asphalt, my body pinning him down.

"Don't touch my girlfriend." I can't recognize the thunderous roar of my own voice. It sounds feral and savage, like an animal about to rip the head off its prey. That's not too far from how I'm feeling at the moment.

My features, reflected in the clear blue pools of Douchebag's eyes, reveal a man I don't know and never believed existed within me. My anger simmers down, but I'm still breathing hard. Still trying to make sense of how murderous I feel. Of how scared I feel.

Behind me, I hear the click of Mira's phone meeting the ground.

Now her nails are digging into my shoulders. She begs me, her voice strained. “Luci, let go. You’ll kill him.”

“Don’t overestimate my strength,” I snap back.

“Don’t underestimate your strength,” she retorts. “I know it better than anyone.”

Right. Because of what we did last Sunday. The memory flares like a new rash, and I’m torn between dislocating Douchebag’s shoulder and holding Mira tight in my embrace. Licking up and down her entire body and erasing that sorrowful look in her eyes.

I send a hard stare to the man trapped under me. “Do you promise to never bother her again?”

He resists and fights, but I must be heavier (or more determined) because he can’t do much against me.

Finally, he gives up.

“Fine,” he spits out. “It’s not like she’s the only chick around. She isn’t even any good in bed.”

I’m thinking of how to punish him for that comment, but Mira’s shoe comes flying at his head. It contacts his skull with a pronounced crunch before dropping to the ground.

“You were terrible, too!” Mira says, retrieving her shoe. “It hurt for days!”

My anger toward Douchebag intensifies at that statement. No wonder Mira doesn’t hook up anymore. I can’t imagine what possessed her to sleep with Douchebag. He isn’t even attractive. But she has always had strange tastes.

“You had better keep your word.” I ease my body off Douchebag’s, wary and cautious until he scrapes to his feet, dusts off his clothes, telegraphs Mira a parting look of disdain, and gets the hell lost.

I stand there until every last trace of him has vanished from the horizon. It’s quiet throughout, but when he’s gone Mira clears her throat.

“I could’ve handled him myself. But thank you for adding unnecessary drama to an already embarrassing situation.” She ambles back inside the hospital. I follow despite my growling stomach and the fact that I’ve wasted half of my rare lunch break. I just can’t leave her alone. What if she runs into Joe in the reception and he pulls his gun out on her again? This girl has too many enemies.

“Can you walk faster?” she says all of a sudden. “People are watching us.”

“Can’t help it. I attract attention wherever I go.” I adjust the sleeves of my white coat which were in a disarray from the scuffle. Then I put an arm around her shoulder because a hug is out of the question and I still can’t overcome the inexplicable need to comfort her. I’m waiting for her to prickle at my overfamiliarity, but she must be really desperate to keep the fake dating lie alive because she doesn’t. “So, who was he? Mr. Douchebag.”

Mira’s hand fist around her scrubs. She closes her eyes. “Just another one of my mistakes.”

“Didn’t think you made those.”

“Stop being judgmental, Luci. It was Valentine’s day, we were third-year residents, and I was totally heartbroken. He was nice to me...” Her voice fades. She begins studying the arrangement of tiles on the floor with great interest. “...and well, not many people are nice to me so I thought he was a good person and I...went with him.”

Despite the euphemism at the end, I get the picture. She slept with him because she felt miserable and hopeless. And he thought she was an easy target because of her sadness.

My next question shoots out like a gun’s trigger recoil. “Did he hurt you?”

“Not like you’re thinking.” Mira bites her lip until she draws blood. “But he was terrible at sex. As you just heard.”

I squeeze her shoulder. “So do you realize my value now?”

“Must you use every single opportunity to gloat about yourself?”

“Sorry.” The apology rolls off my tongue easily. Old habits are hard to break. “But are you okay? I mean, you were almost sexually assaulted.”

“I was never in danger of being assaulted. I’d have stabbed his eyes with my heels if he’d tried anything funny.”

“But still—”

“I’m alright. Worry about yourself, Luci. You’ve had a rough couple of days.”

I’m almost touched that she has been paying attention to my schedule. Then again, I’d do the same. We live and breathe by each other’s movements. It’s called obsession.

I stretch my hands over my head, thankful when my stomach doesn’t growl. “Nothing my body isn’t used to.”

“You robot.”

I’m not convinced that she’s really alright, but when I prod her again, her strides grow long and fast-paced. Her lips draw into a hard line and she leaves me behind, racing ahead. It’s what she always does when she wants to avoid me.

And I do what I’ve always done—I try to keep up with her.

“Who broke your heart?” I inquire casually. “In the third year of residency?”

“I liked another resident.” Her sleek ponytail swings like a pendulum when she shakes her head. “But it was never going to work out.”

February 14th. I remember that date because it was when I hooked up with one of the nurses. The gossip mill milked that one for weeks. I grope for the memory, and then it emerges from the dark ether of my mind like Poseidon emerging from the sea—a single sharp, clear fragment of Mira clicking her tongue as I brushed past her in the hospital’s lobby, my hand linked with the nurse’s. It was a brief encounter. No wonder I forgot about it.

Then my mind connects to something else.

I liked another resident. But it was never going to work out.

It was Valentine's day...I was heartbroken.

Holy fuck. No way.

But suddenly, the impossible doesn't seem impossible anymore. Violence has loosened my mind, and our kiss, our chemistry, our passionate lovemaking, the cryptic Instagram comments, the way Mira always seems wary around me, her inexplicable dislike of the perfection that is me—I see it all in a new light. Mira can snarl and fight and invent a hundred meaningless contests, but all she's doing is making her feelings for me obvious. She's obsessed with me. She has always been obsessed with me.

Because she has always wanted me.

Like I've always wanted her.

And when she couldn't have me, she found solace in the arms of a stranger just like I did, though how she ever thought Douchebag could be a substitute for me baffles the imagination.

I exhale sharply.

It all makes perfect sense. All the years of bickering, finding flimsy excuses and devising competitions to stay together, the nameless disappointment thrumming under my skin like a second heartbeat every time we were close.

“Wait.” I grab Mira's shoulders, turning her around, probing the depths of her eyes for the truth that I've been too idiotic to see and she has been equally idiotic to hide. “You liked *me*?”

“Huh?” Slurred. Slow. Like I plucked her away from a dream.

Her eyes grow big in panic. She stutters, “What...gave you...that idea? Anyway, I have a procedure right now. It was good seeing you, Luci.”

She bolts away like a racehorse determined to win the Kentucky Derby.

But I saw that. I saw it. And I can never un-see it.

My lungs empty in a breath.

Unreal. Mira liked me. Oh my goodness, she liked me all along and I was such an idiot. I was so conceited, so lost in myself that I couldn't see what was in front of me.

I slap a hand against my forehead and slump on the landing. Disappointment at the missed chance opens up a gash in my chest. I'm not sure why it feels like such a physical blow.

It's like my biggest dream suddenly turned into my greatest nightmare.

Minutes tick by silently as I sink into a hellhole of regret, going over every past encounter, every interaction, every word we exchanged around that time.

Until a shadow darkens my world. I look up, wondering if it's about to rain, but it's Joe looming over me like a dark rain cloud.

"Things were getting violent so I thought I'd offer my expertise," he says. "Your friend saved my buddy Tony after all."

I'm still in a half trance, and my brain has decided that since nothing makes sense, it won't aspire for logic anymore. "She liked me," I tell Joe, pointing at the spot where Mira and I stood earlier with Douchebag. "She liked me when we were younger. And I never noticed."

Joe doesn't look startled at my sudden nonsensical ramblings. His lips tick upward in a pitying smile before returning to their usual scowling position. "And you like her?"

"Of course I like her!" I exclaim.

He pulls my pathetic body up from the ground. His silent perusal of me draws sweat from my pores. Joe's eyes mirror a hungry tiger up close. "If you liked her so much, why did you shit talk her the first time we met?"

“I didn’t want you pressuring her to succeed,” I say. “Emergency surgeries are difficult even for the best of surgeons. She’ll make big promises because she doesn’t like disappointing patients, then cry herself to sleep after she fails.”

“You went about it in a roundabout way.”

I tug at my white coat, hiding my face under the collar. “I’m not good with these things.”

“These things, meaning communication?”

“No, these things, meaning feelings.”

I guess he’s right, though. Mira and I are both terrible at communication. Why did she never tell me? A confession could’ve spared us so much anger and heartbreak and third-rate sexual partners.

But if I’d been in her place, would I have done anything differently?

Would I have offered my heart on a platter to someone who had every chance of driving a knife through it?

I’ll be the first to admit that I haven’t exactly been nice to Mira. Sure, it was two-sided, but all we’ve done is exchange barbs and try to one-up each other at every occasion. I’ve said some pretty mean things to her which I regret, and I’ve been more self-absorbed than I should have.

What if Mira thought loving me would be the same as losing to me?

Because that’s how I’ve felt about her all this time. It’s why I want to prove that I’m better than her. So she respects me. Maybe then, she’ll see me differently. Think of me differently. Maybe then I’ll have a chance.

But unbeknownst to me, I already had my chance years ago.

“Sorrow is a butterfly.” I’ve somehow walked all the way inside the hospital to where Tony’s in a wheelchair. He’s in a poetic mood today.

Joe seizes the wheelchair before waving goodbye to me. “We’ll be going then.”

“Don’t forget to come in for your follow-up appointments,” I say.

Joe nods. Tony’s staring at me like there’s a cockroach on my face.

“Why does he look so blue?” Tony asks Joe, referring to me in the third person when I’m standing right here.

“He can’t tell the girl he likes that he likes her,” Joe replies.

“That’s not the problem here—”

Tony’s cry of pity cuts me off. “Pride is the real villain of all love stories.”

“Thanks for that philosophical nugget, but that’s not the issue—”

“Life’s short.” Tony shakes his head, dismissing my excuses. “You can be shot anytime so grab happiness by the horns before someone puts a bullet through you and you end up in the emergency room. Because not everybody is lucky enough to survive. Many of my brothers...they never had the chance.”

I knead my nose. “I’ll...um...keep that in mind.”

SEVENTEEN

Mira

I think Luci has figured it out. Well, it doesn't take a genius to make the connection since I almost confessed to liking him. While I'm hyperventilating and wondering what his next move will be, if he'll use the intel to embarrass me etc. etc. he continues to act like usual. I mean the new usual, which involves smiling at each other, buying snacks, and laughing like lunatics for no reason when we're in each other's exalted presence.

My heart almost falls out of my mouth when Dr. Burns walks past us in the hallway later that day, watching us like he's an FBI agent on a mission to figure out a drug operation.

"Everything well?" His question is loaded with subtext.

"We're doing great!" I say chirpily. "Thank you for being so understanding."

I'm a lot of things, but chirpy isn't one of them. So my overly optimistic behavior only serves to deepen the program director's suspicion. "You seem different."

A deep sigh rolls over my tongue and out of my mouth.

This is getting tiring. Nobody believes us, not even the nurses. I feel like a bacterium under a microscope at work these days. Then again, it has only been two weeks. It'll take longer than that to convince people. I'm in it for the long haul anyway. Especially since fake dating Lucien means we can

continue having great sex. Our chemistry is so natural and he gets my fantasies. I'm not complaining, that's for sure.

I rip out of the hospital the moment my shift ends. I've packed myself into a crowded subway train in the middle of rush hour. I head straight home where I proceed to scream like a distressed cat.

I can't believe what happened. I'm not even disturbed by the fact that Tom showed up out of the blue. I could've handled him.

But I cannot handle Luci knowing that I liked him when we were residents. He must be laughing maniacally right now, pitying my pathetic self. His ego will be the size of the universe tomorrow.

Defeated, I drop into my bed and do the worst possible thing I can do at this moment—call my mother. It has been a long time since I called. She texts me instead of calling these days because she doesn't know when I might be in surgery.

“Mira. How are you?” The first thing I notice about my mother's voice is how she doesn't sound happy to hear my voice. Which deflates my already deflated mood further. “Don't you have to be at the hospital?”

“My shift is over. I had free time. Thought I'd say hi.”

“Okay.” I hear the sound of steel utensils being thrown around in the kitchen. Mama must be cooking. “How are your friends?”

I have no idea why she always asks this question. She knows I don't have any friends. Except she thinks Lucien is my friend. I've never managed to correct that misconception and am not about to start now.

“They're fine. Busy. By the way, I went to Niagara this weekend with my colleagues. It was a great trip. Maybe we can go there sometime, the two of us.”

“Maybe,” my mother replies absently. She sounds so distracted. “Are you eating properly? What are you making for dinner today?”

She'll lecture me if I say takeout, so I lie and tell her I'm planning to make biryani, a delicious and relatively difficult Indian rice dish.

My mother's scorn bleeds through the phone. "Do you even know how to make that?"

"I looked it up online."

"Call me if you mess up."

"Why do you always think I'll mess up?" I grumble, irritation climbing high in my throat like ivy. I hate when my mother looks down on me. I mean, how difficult can it be to follow a Youtube video? Does she think I'm not even smart enough to do that?

Shards of memories, of all the times she made me feel stupid leap to the forefront of my mind. I bury them once again because no matter how much I resent her, she isn't going to change. I'll let this one slide, too.

"You have to be careful at this time. This is your last year. Are you applying for any jobs?"

I expel a frustrated growl. Just like that, my mother's badgering me into getting a job again.

"Not yet," I tell her. "But I'm going to move back home. So I'll try applying for something nearby."

A raspy cough filters into my ears, followed by a hard syllable. "No."

"You're getting old," I protest. "You can't keep living alone."

"I can. There are no famous hospitals here, anyway." Of course, there aren't. My mother lives in a small town in New Jersey with a population of ten thousand which is only famous for the expensive boarding school that Luci and I attended, where kids of the rich and famous come to study. It's not a hub of finance like New York. "You can't ruin your career after you studied so hard. You should work at a big hospital in a big city. Otherwise, what am I supposed to tell all our relatives? That you studied at a big university only to become a local

doctor in the middle of nowhere? Most of them can't even pronounce the name of our town."

"Is that what matters?"

"Why don't you have any ambition? Your friend's father is the director of a big hospital. You have connections. You can do so much better, but you never even try. That's why I have to keep pushing you." Steely determination laces her words.

"You mean Lucien?" I pause. "We're not friends anymore."

"What do you mean? He works with you."

"Yeah, but we don't talk to each other much." This is the biggest lie I've ever told, but I need my mother to stop thinking of Lucien as my friend. For goodness sake, I'm sleeping with him. Also, once this fake dating spectacle is over, I doubt we'll want anything to do with each other. So I should prepare her for that day starting now.

"Did you have a fight?" A sharp, scathing question that sounds more like an accusation. Fire bursts at the pit of my stomach. Before I can shout back, my mother cuts me. "You should apologize."

"Why do you always think it's my fault?"

"Because you're bad at communication," she says flatly. "Listen to me, Mira. You can't get ahead in life if you don't know the right people. Sometimes, you have to be humble and ask for help from others."

"I don't need connections to get a job! This isn't India."

"That may be true, but you need connections to prosper in life anywhere...we're not from this country. Your father and I didn't know anybody so we couldn't get many opportunities. We worked hard, but I've realized there's a limit to how high you can climb with hard work alone." My mother trails off.

"Don't nag me," I say. "I hate it when you do that."

"I'm your mother. If I don't teach you these things, who will?"

I groan. My mother always has this holier-than-thou attitude when it comes to ‘telling me how to do things’. It’s just micromanagement, if you ask me. And every time she does it, my confidence drops a notch. Why does she have to treat me like a stupid little child at this age?

“I’m grown up enough to be able to think for myself,” I snap. “I’ll get a job wherever I want.”

“Fine. But don’t come crying to me when you realize you’ve wasted your life and all your friends are more successful than you are,” my mother informs me, shifting away from pressuring me to make up with Luci.

“Can we stop talking about me?” I knead the tight muscles in my forehead. I swear, my mother always manages to get on my nerves. “What about your work?”

“I’m a legal secretary,” her tone goes flat. “Not much happens at my work. But the other day, I went to the hospital. There’s something on my upper eyelid.”

The doctor in me enters panic mode immediately. “Since when?”

“A long time. I can’t remember exactly. The doctor first said it was a sty, but now they’re not sure.”

“Any other symptoms? Pain in the eye? Vision problems?”

“Nothing like that.”

“Anything else wrong? Stomach problems?”

“No. If you ask me, the doctor here’s just incompetent. That’s why I’ve made an appointment at a big hospital for Saturday. I’ll get looked at by better doctors. Maybe they’ll figure it out.”

I continue my interrogation, a bad feeling cramping my stomach. The hospital she’s going to is in the next town over. She’ll have to drive a long distance. But my mother seems determined. Also, I agree with the fact that the only doctor in our town—a family physician—isn’t exactly...great. I’d breathe easier knowing she’s being looked at by competent medical professionals who are experts in their fields.

“It could be a tumor,” I tell her. “You should go to the hospital sooner. I can come home tomorrow and take you.”

I don’t enjoy being around my mother, but I’ll be only too glad to find some excuse to get away from Lucien, at least until this whole episode blows over.

“Don’t miss work. I can go on my own. And it’s not so serious. Otherwise wouldn’t I know?”

People don’t always know when they have life-threatening illness. But if I tell her that, I’ll get into a whole other argument about how she knows her body best. My mother’s highly irrational. She even leaves for work an hour early because she doesn’t want to go in an inauspicious hour. I’ve never managed to get her to agree with my point of view on anything ever. That’s what makes talking with her such a chore.

“Sure. I’ll call you on Saturday evening to check on you,” I tell her.

“Okay. Bye.”

I was expecting her to badger me some more but I suppose she has said her piece and is more interested in making dinner. I stare at the call time. Less than three minutes. Our conversations are usually short and straight to the point. But now that I have lost the distraction of my mother’s fault-finding, I’m back to stressing about my confession.

To compound my agony, I log onto Instagram. I posted a couple of new pictures of myself since the trip, though it’s only been two days. Anxiety mauls the inside of my stomach when I receive a notification that Lucien has left comments on my pictures.

I’m the luckiest man on Earth because I get to see this face every day.

You’re amazing.

I remember the day you took this picture. My memory is clearer than this picture.

He's taking the 'praise me' condition of our sexual bargain too seriously, but I must say, reading this makes my insides feel all warm and fuzzy. Even though these words are cliché and overblown. Plus, Luci wrote them to get laid so they don't mean anything.

They're just pretty lies. But they're *my* pretty lies.

I hug my phone, not thinking too hard about how stupid I am for clinging to false hope and false praise like a starved woman.

I'm glad I at least have this.

Saturday comes and goes as effortlessly as binging through the new season of Bridgerton on Netflix. And Luci doesn't call. Or text. Or show any signs that he's still interested in blowing my mind with the romantic gesture he promised.

Now, this is a typical commitment phobic move. He wanted no-strings attached sex with a fake girlfriend, and was willing to throw around some money to impress me, but if feelings are involved, that changes everything. I'm assuming he's not interested anymore.

Why does that sting? Even if it's an indirect rejection, even if I know I'll be better off without him. Is it so unimaginable for him to like me back? We're both smart, passionate...wait what am I thinking. I don't want him to like me back. He's trouble and not worth it. I have more self-love than that. Luci hates complicated relationships. You only have to look at his relationship history to surmise that.

On Sunday, I'm wrecked by loss of sleep and curiosity. I devoured two smutty books overnight and now I'm horny along with being disappointed and depressed. Lucien finally texts at 10 am.

Sorry. Was sick yesterday. Better today. We'll have to move our engagement to some other time.

Just that. Is that an adequate explanation? Probably. Am I satisfied? No. I want to strangle him for inflating my hopes and hyping this up, for once again reducing my dreams to ashes and showing me how little I matter to him. I don't know what I thought was going to happen. Did I think things were going to change between us? That what was fake was going to become real?

Being casually cruel is Luci's forte. How did I forget that?

He's probably feigning illness to let me down gently. Then again, he's not so well-mannered. He must actually be sick.

I fire back a text. *No problem. BTW, what's wrong with you?*

Lucien: Food poisoning.

He replies fast. It's one of the things I like about Luci, I realize. He doesn't play games when it comes to waiting to text. Because right now, I'm a volatile ball of frustration and if he tries anything like that, I might just march over to his home and strangle him.

I type another message.

Do you have anything to eat?

Lucien: I'll cook something.

When you're sick?

Lucien: I'm fine.

Wait. I'll come over. What is your address?

This is too close to admitting that I care for him, but after I accidentally blurted out that I liked him, a little more desperation won't hurt me. Besides, he has seen my apartment and I'd like to see his. I'm already certain it'll be glossy and snazzy, like something out of a home magazine.

Lucien: You can't cook, though.

I chuckle. *That's what you think.*

Lucien: I can't risk getting sick again. I need to work tomorrow.

Me: You'll never get another opportunity to witness my fine cooking skills. Last chance.

Lucien: No, thanks.

I blow out a defeated breath. I mean, I tried. I'm not even sure what I was trying for, but whatever it was, he rejected me. Again. This is like an endless cycle with us.

I power on my Kindle and root through it for another quick smutty read. I buy them by the dozen because romance and fantasy sex are big needs in my life.

When I finally pick my next read, another message pops up on my phone.

It's Lucien's address. I'm not sure what this means or what he wants me to do with it, but my imagination is exploding with possibilities. Maybe he wants me to come over. Maybe we could get down and dirty. Maybe it'll be like last time.

The thought feels like a cold bucket of water poured on my face.

No. I said I wouldn't be his booty call. I need to stick to my ideals.

When his next message lights up my phone, I'm relieved.

Lucien: I ran out of toilet paper. Buy me some and deliver to this address immediately.

Me: I don't work for Postmates. But I'm kind, so I'll do this for you, Luci.

A frisson of happiness radiates through my body. I don't know why I'm so happy at the thought of seeing Lucien. At the thought of doing something useful and taking care of him.

I dash down to the Duane Reade that's close to where I live and buy the brand that Lucien specified. It's the most expensive one in the store. My eyes wander toward the condoms aisle but I shake my head and grab some saltine

crackers, bread and Gatorades, in case he was too proud to ask for those.

The plastic bag crinkles in the wind as I stride down to his apartment building. I've never been inside, but the doorman doesn't stop me, even if he squints at me extra hard. The huge, high-ceilinged reception area with a concierge greets me. A complicated metal sculpture hangs down from the ceiling. I poke around and discover that the building has conference rooms, pool tables, a heated swimming pool, a state-of-the-art gym and other facilities for residents.

The very air inside this building feels different from mine. I guess this is how rich people live. It's not like I can't afford this kind of luxury. I'd just feel very out of place in it. My mother's home is a modest two-bedroom place, shabby and a bit dilapidated. I doubt someone like Lucien has ever seen anything like it.

I give my name to the person at the reception and they let me go through. Lucien's apartment is on the fifth floor.

I buzz and he appears. But when I lay eyes on him, a host of dark feelings explode. He's bare-chested, his beautiful muscles straining against smooth skin, the waistband of his joggers ill-fitting and slanted on his hips like he threw it on in a hurry. His heavy-lidded eyes flash irritation as I hand him the goods I bought. When he leans forward, a reddish-brown smudge behind his ear becomes visible.

I freeze. Could that be lipstick?

A wave of nausea rolls through me. How stupid am I? He's not sick. He's just too busy fucking someone else. Typical Lucien. I was beginning to wonder how he'd cope without his usual string of hook ups. Looks like he hasn't been missing any action at all.

"Did I disturb something?" I squeak.

He rubs his eyes. "My sleep."

"You're alone?" It's a good thing I have a darker complexion or my face would be as red as a tomato.

"I live alone."

The ugly feelings from earlier calms down. It was a misunderstanding. But I'm far too used to seeing Luci with some random chick at the very moment when I am getting ready to open my heart to him.

He opens the door wider and I step in. I was convinced he'd chase me away, but now I get to see the glorious beauty that's his apartment. It's not a studio. It has two whole bedrooms. That's a massive luxury in Manhattan. He must be paying through the gills for this place. Or maybe Mommy and Daddy bought it for him. Seems possible.

"What the hell do you do with two bedrooms?" I ask.

"I like space," Lucien replies, yawning.

My manners are nonexistent when I'm around Luci, so I take a peek into both rooms. One is a mess, with tissues discarded all around the bed, the sheets crumpled, the nightstands crowded with medicines, empty plates, dirty spoons and a mobile phone placed precariously at the edge. The other is an office, with a swivel chair and table packed with medical papers and thick tomes. There's also a bookshelf holding even more books. Not a single escapist novel in sight. Also, no other woman in sight.

I clean up the first room, throwing away the trash, gathering up the dirty plates and spoons and stacking them in the dishwasher, which this apartment also has. Mine doesn't.

"Can you—"

"I know how to operate a dishwasher, Luci," I snap out.

"You don't have to do this," he says. "I'm thankful you bought me stuff."

"I'll cook you something, too. Now that I'm here," I say.

"Careful. You're acting like a real girlfriend. I don't want a possessive monster on my hands."

I tie my hair into a messy bun. "You're not worth being possessive about."

He's munching on the saltine crackers now, crumpled up on the sofa. I examine him quickly. He looks a bit tired, but

otherwise hot as a sin. Like my mother says, meritocracy is a myth. The world wasn't created fairly.

I clear my throat. "So, are you planning to take a shower anytime soon?"

Lucien's gaze rockets up to me. "When I can enjoy watching you squirm at my semi-nakedness instead?"

"Don't flatter yourself." I hiss. "You smell like a flat tire."

One dark eyebrow flexes upward. "What happened to being nice and complimenting each other? Oh, by the way, this jumpsuit looks nice on you. Hugs all the right places."

Breath fills up my chest. I forget to exhale. My fingers curl under the kitchen counter. Lucien's sensual tone has lit a fire between my legs and neither he nor I are in a condition to do anything about it.

"Okay. I'll cut you some slack since you're sick." I say, looking inside his refrigerator for something to cook with, hoping the cold air will cool my head and my body. "You have a fantastic apartment. I'm totally jealous."

"And you have a fantastic ass," he calls over from the sofa, watching me as I'm bending in front of the fridge. "Not that I'm jealous."

I click my tongue. "Cut the sweet talk, Luci. You failed to perform a romantic gesture for me, so I'm not going to sleep with you, despite your compliments."

His shoulders drop. A pensive look blooms over his features. He stretches his long, beautiful legs over the sofa. His feet hang over the edge because of how tall he is. He reaches for the TV remote, but doesn't press any buttons. He studies it for a few moments, then says, "I don't understand how to do a romantic gesture. Amanda told me I should fly you to Paris."

"That's definitely a romantic gesture, but please don't do it." I'd feel terribly indebted to him if he spent that much money on me. I know he's rich, but I don't like being lavished with expensive things. It makes me feel uncomfortable. Like someone's buying my affection. "Stick to cheap or free things."

“Like what?”

“Like doing something meaningful.”

“What would be meaningful? I don’t even know what you like.”

I like being with you, I want to tell him. But of course, I’m not that masochistic.

In the first place, I can’t believe I’m feeling things for Lucien. That’s unacceptable. Of all the nice, decent guys in the world with a healthy ego, I had to fall for the one I absolutely cannot have. My pulse skyrockets at the mere thought of confessing my feelings to Lucien. He’d just laugh it off. Or gloat about his attractiveness and tell me how I’m just another female who has fallen head over heels for his godlike charm. I don’t think my heart can recover from a blow that big. So I’ll keep my mouth zipped.

“I like trying new, fun things,” I tell him. “Indoor activities like painting or chess or reading. I even like watching movies.”

“That sounds like a date,” Lucien surmises, with the clear unsaid text soaking through his critical tone: we’re not dating, nor will we ever.

“Well, then maybe something else...” Oh god, my mind’s struggling. “Buy me chocolates. I’ll count that as a win.”

His lips turn downward. “That’s not grand.”

“Sorry for my limited imagination.”

I give up trying to cook something and settle for boiling pasta. He can’t eat anything rich on his upset stomach anyway. Also, I may have exaggerated my cooking abilities. When I’m done, I hand it to him. Luci wrinkles his nose and bites down on a single tubular pasta.

“At least it’s cooked,” he says. “Though I expected more.”

“I’m being considerate of your health,” I tell him.

His features crinkle. He’s silently calling me out on my bullshit.

“Also, it’s sexist to expect me to be a good cook because I’m a woman,” I add.

“For the record, I never expected you to be able to cook well. Or at all. I expressed my concerns regarding your culinary ability quite eloquently over text message. You’re the one who made false promises.”

“It isn’t hard to follow a recipe.” I shrug.

“Have you ever done it, though?”

“A few times. It tasted alright.”

“You’re not eating?” he asks, pointing to his half-empty plate.

“No, I’ll just stare at you. It’s more satisfying.” I claim the spot next to him, keeping a safe distance. “You look very uncomfortable from this angle.”

“That’s because I am.”

I can’t help scooting nearer to him, touching my hand to his head to gauge his body temperature. “Do you feel sick again?”

He violently jerks his head, making me drop my hand. “No. I’m not.”

“Well, that’s good. I didn’t come prepared to clean vomit in any case,” I say.

He eats more pasta, but slowly. I’d have finished all of it by now. But who knows? Maybe it tastes far worse than it looks, which would be a miracle because it looks very unappetizing. I feel sorry for Lucien. He probably wishes he’d never asked me to run that errand for him. Then he could be eating his own superior cooking rather than this.

“Don’t be so quiet. It’s making me anxious,” Luci says a few moments later.

“Can I ask you a question?” I curl my palms over my knees. “Have you ever fallen in love with a woman? Like, seriously?”

I expect him to evade but he nods. There's no hurt or the kind of nostalgic sadness in his eyes that you'd expect from someone who had his heart broken by his first love. So it must've ended well. Maybe they just lost interest in each other.

"Who was she?" I kinda want to know. "Childhood friend?"

"My aunt, actually. I even proposed to her."

"Your aunt!?"

"Ever heard of Maxima Anderson?"

"The world famous actress? Of course I have."

"She's the one."

"You proposed to Maxima Anderson? How old were you?"

"Nine." He laughs. "You answer my question now. What makes you happy?"

"I'm not sure," I say. "Saving somebody's life?"

He shakes his head. "That's not a real answer. Saving lives makes all doctors happy. What makes you happy as a person?"

"Reading." I tap my chin, thoughts too slow to keep pace with my voice. "Watching interesting shows. Fantasy and escapism, I guess."

"That's all small stuff. What about deep happiness? Big happiness?"

"I don't think happiness is a big, complicated thing." I inhale the familiar, masculine scent of him and it triggers something in me. A sense of comfort I never knew I felt. "Most of the time, it's right under your nose. Within easy reach."

Our gazes lock, an entire library of unsaid words and unexpressed thoughts buried in our eyes. The longer we're together, the more volumes we collect, and the less likely it becomes that we'll ever find the courage to read them out to each other.

Luci swallows, opening his mouth, failing to formulate a reply. He closes it.

I scratch my lip.

Then we both look away.

I think the truth, too, has always been right under my nose, but it's more brutal than happiness.

EIGHTEEN

Lucien

“How’s your romantic gesture coming along? Anything video-worthy yet?” Amanda inquires, cookie in hand, standing in front of a vending machine on the third floor.

I insert a few quarters into the slot. “I’m still thinking.”

“Can’t wait for the pictures on Instagram. I’m sure they’ll be epic.” She lays a reassuring hand on my shoulder as she flies past, her phone lit up with a call from Ruby.

I jab the code for Sun chips, then wend my way back to the fellow room where I need to finish some work on the computer.

As I’m crossing the hallway, a shadow tickles the tip of my shoes.

A deep, familiar voice calls my name. “Lucien, can I have a moment?”

Dr. Burns. All the muscles in my body curl in tension at the sight of him. Anxiety ripples through my insides. Is this what it feels to live a lie? I’m always scared I’ll be called out. More than that, I feel embarrassed because Dr. Burns still thinks I was making out with Mira at the hospital. I mean, everybody thinks that, but their opinions don’t matter much to me. I respect Dr. Burns. He’s a fair man, and I know he has always had high hopes for me and my work. He used to respect me. Until the disaster. Now there’s pity and suspicion

permanently tattooed to his expression whenever he looks at Mira or me.

“Sure.” I swipe my tongue over my dry lips. “I have a minute.”

Dr. Burns motions for me to follow him. We both end up in his office. It’s a big, clean room, much better than the fellow room, but not as swanky as Uncle Henry’s C-suite office or the offices of big lawyers at law firms. It’s functional, with the barest hints of personality. Dr. Burns is divorced and doesn’t have kids, but there are family pictures with his brothers and his parents decorating his desk.

He gestures at me to take a seat and I do, heart thumping loudly. My brain is still trying to solve the puzzle of why I’m here. Did Mira and I mess up in any way? Does Dr. Burns suspect I tried to manhandle her and she just stood up for me because she didn’t want drama? Did someone convince him I’m bullying her? Does he know we’re fake dating?

Goodness, am I about to have disciplinary action taken against me?

My toes sweat inside my procedure shoes.

“It’s about the AATS Cardiothoracic Resident Case Report Competition next week,” Dr. Burns opens.

All the stress gushes out of me. Oh, it’s about work.

“I hope your presentation is done,” Dr. Burns continues. “I’m happy to help if you need any. And I’d like to hear your presentation sometime before you leave for Boston.”

Right. The American Association for Thoracic Surgery’s Cardiothoracic Resident Case Report Competition. The premier competition for promising future surgeons. My parents pressured me into applying because that’s what they’re like and then it turned into a competition with Mira. She lost because Dr. Burns picked me to represent the school. I submitted a brief abstract on the AATS website some months ago detailing an unusual case I worked on. My abstract impressed them (obviously) and I was notified of my selection. I’ve been invited to the Annual Meeting in Boston to

make an oral mini-presentation of my case where the final winner of the competition will be declared. The tickets were paid for by the association and I get \$500 if I win, which is a chump change for me, so I'm definitely not in it for the money.

"I'm done with the presentation," I reply. "Do you have free time tomorrow?"

Dr. Burns nods. "I thought you'd be distracted with everything that has happened. I'm happy that isn't the case."

I'm distracted, alright, but I'm used to managing both work and my messy personal life at the same time.

"I didn't intend for my personal life to become workplace gossip, but it's not the worst thing that has happened to me." I flinch inwardly at the edge in my voice. I hope he doesn't think I'm blaming him for all this. I'm not sure whose fault all of this is. Probably mine. Since I discovered what an absolute idiot I was in the past, I feel like everything is my fault.

"I'll warn the staff to respect your privacy," Dr. Burns says. "I don't want anybody to feel uncomfortable working here."

I jump to my feet. "See you tomorrow, then."

Dr. Burns isn't the type to engage in unnecessary small talk and waste the time of fellows. So he lets me go.

The subject of my AATS presentation flees my mind the moment I exit the office. I don't obsess over how prepared I am to present, or mysteriously recall the typo on slide three. I don't stalk my opponents on Twitter and LinkedIn, either. The usual fire to prove myself and win the competition has been extinguished.

These things used to be the focal point of my life, but now they've become unimportant. Since I discovered that Mira used to like me, something has changed. I no longer have the same priorities.

All I obsess over is: how can I fix my stupid mistake from years ago? If she liked me before, can I make her like me again?

How can I make her like me again?

I slide into my seat in the fellow room. Instead of polishing my presentation, I log onto Amazon and start shopping.

An idea has been brewing in my mind for some time. I got it after the conversation Mira and I had on Sunday. I've realized I don't need to go overboard. I don't need to show off my money to impress Mira, considering that has always failed to work in the past. If happiness is simple, then so is romance.

NINETEEN

Mira

On Tuesday, Lucien brings me homemade lunch. It's aggravatingly delicious and I let him know. Instead of gloating, he tells me he doesn't mind feeding me every day. Terrifyingly enough, I think he actually means it.

On Wednesday, I eavesdrop on his AATS presentation in Dr. Burns's office (unintentionally) and tell Dr. Burns he made the right choice by picking Lucien for the competition. Lucien looks shocked and inexplicably, I feel proud of myself for being such a graceful loser.

On Thursday, we bump into each other during our morning run and Luci tries to match my pace instead of showing off his superior athleticism. Later, we grab breakfast together and I pay. He thanks me with a smile instead of reiterating how poor I am.

My heart withers and dies and is resurrected all in that one moment.

These days, I'm more scared of Lucien than death. He has been acting so...different since we slept with each other. If I'd known banging him was all it'd take to turn him into a sweet Romeo, I'd have done that ages ago. But he isn't the only one acting differently. His behavior is changing mine, too. Instead of remembering to smile at him when people are around, I do it naturally. Instead of praising him because I must, I do it

because it no longer feels like losing. I don't rub my superiority in his face at every opportunity.

Either we're both committed to perfecting our fake girlfriend-boyfriend dynamic or something else is afoot...

On Friday, Lucien promises me that he'll deliver the Great Romantic Gesture on Saturday morning at 11 am. Location: his apartment.

I guess he gave up on brunches atop the Eiffel Tower and decided to go with a simple home-cooked meal. It's both cheap and doesn't make me feel uncomfortable, so I agree.

Besides, I'm looking forward to spending time with him, because for some reason, I've started to enjoy his company. I was amused when he told me about falling in love with his aunt, about how she used to be his babysitter before she made it big, and the fun they had and the places they went together. It wasn't a soul-baring revelation but I thought it was cute. Lucien isn't someone I consider cute or innocent. I guess I assumed he was always an overachieving, over-competitive genius. And now I want to discover all the other sides of him that I didn't know about.

I wish I could say my curiosity was purely professional or for the sake of gathering incriminating information that I can use to offset the fact that Luci found out about me liking him in the past. But if I'm being honest, it has been a long time since I thought about beating him at anything.

I don't have high hopes when I show up at Lucien's glossy apartment on Saturday. I know he can whip up a feast without breaking a sweat. If it had been someone who actually cared about me, a simple meal would have meant the world. But from Lucien, it seems like a cop-out. Like he doesn't want to even try for depth. He's not interested in knowing about my

interests or what I like. He wants to do the most cliché, uninspired thing and tick this cumbersome ritual off his list. Sadness and frustration burn twin trails of fire through my stomach.

Regardless of my double standards, I'm prepared to be grateful for the free meal. Given that I almost jumped him the last time I was here, I can't live through another close encounter that ends in no sex.

But when I step into Luci's apartment, the table is empty. No food. Maybe it's still in the oven. Or in the fridge, waiting to be microwaved. I crane my head, but the stovetop's empty, and the oven's too dark to see inside.

I settle my hands over my hip, giving a final glance at the kitchen. I sniff the air for the lingering scent of food, but it smells sterile like a hospital.

"Don't tell me you thought your presence qualified as a romantic gesture." I frown, hands not shifting off my hips.

"Of course not." Luci gestures at me to follow him. "I have more creativity than that."

A shudder skims down my spine. I'm not psyched to see what 'creativity' he's referring to. The funny yet strangely arousing images of Lucien doing a pole dance swim inside my head. Although I don't think that's romantic, it's funny and I wouldn't mind it. It'd give me blackmail material at least.

"Isn't this your bedroom?" My eyebrows strain to the top of my forehead when Lucien turns the knob on the closed white door. "I told you I'm not about to sleep with you unless you do something romantic. And no, a beautiful bed with rose petals and candles doesn't count for romance."

Luci doesn't falter or hesitate at my words.

"Prepare to have your mind blown," he says before throwing the door open with a flourish.

The inside of the room looks completely different from before. The bed's still there, but I almost miss it. Because right by the window is a whole setup of fairy lights and books arranged in tall piles. A plush armchair centers the corner

space, along with a velvet footrest and a furry red rug over which all of the stuff is placed. Next to the chair, I spy wine bottles, cheese, crackers, and grapes spread on a coffee table.

I tiptoe toward the arrangement of furniture like it's a tiger about to eat me alive. My gaze rakes the spines of the mountain of books.

Virgin Bride for the Emperor. Ravishing the Heiress. The Billionaire's Innocent Mistress. Possessed. Devoured. Consumed. Burned... All the volumes of the possessed series. I've tried for months to find the last volume, but it's out of print and it costs like \$200 on Amazon. It takes all my self-control to not pluck that one out of the stack and start flipping the pages immediately.

I can't forget where I am. Or who I'm with.

"What's this?" I choke out.

"It's a reading nook filled with books I'm sure you'll love." Lucien shuffles closer, his voice skimming right over my ear. "You said reading books makes you happy."

He was listening to that? Wait, why am I surprised? He has two functioning ears. Of course he can hear. There's nothing special about this. It's not brunch atop the Eiffel Tower or a romantic evening overlooking the Tokyo Tower.

It's not even an expensive Michelin star restaurant.

So what if he spent \$200 on an erotica novella? So what if he wasted hours setting all this up? So what if he took the time to figure my tastes out? So what if he got it right?

Doesn't mean anything, I tell myself. It just reflects how desperate he is to get laid.

But the niggle in my heart doesn't agree. I never imagined there would come a day when I'm moved by something Luci does. For me.

"This is perfect." The words are tripping over my tongue, racing through the air before I can snap out of my trance. I grab *Burned* off the shelf and greedily turn the page, the printed letters burning into my retinas.

I could die of humiliation. But at least I'll die happy. More importantly, I'd have read *Burned* before I die. My life was worthwhile.

"I'm glad you like my surprise." Luci's shadow caresses my back. "But I got this armchair so you could sit on it."

I tear my eyes away from *Burned* for a mere second, long enough to locate the position of the said chair. I settle myself into it and stretch my legs on the footrest. Luci opens the bottle of red wine—something unpronounceable in French which I'm sure costs a small fortune—and pours it into the glass while I leisurely turn a page. The smell soaks into my senses and I feel like I'm inside a dream.

This has to be a dream. Lucien's waiting hand and foot on me while I read erotica right under his nose. I don't even feel awkward. My body is saturated with happiness.

The bubble pops quickly, though, as he continues to hover over me, trying to feed me cheese and grapes and I start to worry his attention is straying to the content of my book. This is real taboo NSFW stuff.

I don't want him staring at my face while I'm getting off on a book.

"I can feed myself. Why don't you do something else?" It's loud, accusing.

"Should I leave? I'm sure you want to read in peace." It's thoughtful that he respects my privacy to indulge in my fantasies alone.

But the room will be barren without him here. There's no spark, no tension, nothing. It's like I'm by myself in my room. Which is lovely, but I didn't come all the way here for that.

"No, stay here," I blurt out before I can think of something he can occupy himself with. I mean, he's not about to sit at the bed and glare at me, is he?

"Alright. I guess I'll read something, too." He says it so casually as he reaches for *Ravishing the Heiress* and pops it open.

As if it's just another book. As if he reads books like these all the time.

Which I definitely know he doesn't. And while his open-mindedness is great, I don't want him to know the actual content of these books because it's much worse than what the covers suggest. He'll never stop judging me for liking this stuff. All the respect I built up in his eyes over the years will crash and burn in one second.

Fear floods my system. I stumble out of the armchair in a blind panic.

"Are you crazy? You can't read this." I tear the book out of Lucien's hands before his gaze can connect with the page.

Then gasp, dumbfounded by my own reaction.

Oh god, I sound so judgmental right now. It's not like I'm embarrassed about enjoying bodice rippers or look down on other people enjoying smutty novels. Whatever floats their boat. Everybody has their preferences. But I can't maintain my cool or my fairness when I'm faced with the most beautiful pair of blue eyes.

"Why?" Lucien seizes his stolen book back. "I think I may enjoy this. It sounds intriguing. I'd love to find out what happens when a Viking Lord marries a maiden from the village."

"Well, he'll deflower her. There's no plot. That's the type of book this is," I say.

"Deflower?" Lucien's barely holding back a smile. "I don't think I've heard that word used this way before."

I sigh. "They have sex. It's an archaic term."

"So what's wrong with that?"

"Nothing, except he whispers embarrassing sweet-nothings in her ears and tells her she's the most beautiful woman he has ever seen."

"Careful, Mira, you're swooning."

A growl slips from my throat. “Can’t help it. I’m a total romantic. But you’re not. So I’m not sure you’ll appreciate this book. You’ll probably think it’s too unrealistic and cheesy.”

Not to mention not entirely politically correct.

My lip wobbles as Lucien turns the page. I close my eyes. Oh god, he’ll never look at me the same again. He’ll write me off as a crazy, weak-hearted, double-faced woman who preaches feminism on the outside while reading books with dubious power dynamics in my free time where virginal women get deflowered by powerful men much older than them. But the thing about fantasies is that they allow you to live experiences you’d never want to live in real life. To be vulnerable without losing anything. To be someone you’re not and have no interest in being, except inside the safe confines of your mind.

I jerk when his hand slides over my cheek. His voice, sweet, drips over my senses. “It’s just a book, Mira.”

I falter. My heart somersaults in my chest. A few simple words.

But I’ve never felt more understood in my life.

He’s right. It’s just a book.

“I know.” I slide my hand over his. His skin feels warm. Safe. Lovely. “It’s just entertainment. Something that makes me relax. There’s no deeper meaning to it.”

His chin hits the top of my head when he nods.

“I’m not judging you. I’m trying to understand you. So let me read it, okay?” He rubs his throat. “Then you can judge me, too. For reading books like these.”

A pressure pokes against the center of my chest. Feelings, deep, glorious, warm feelings inundate my body and burst out of me. I lock my arms around Luci, wrapping him tight, pressing my body against his. I love him so much at this moment. My feelings might even transcend love. I even forget about all the times he broke my heart unintentionally. I forgive

him for everything. All that matters is that he's here and he's mine.

"Thank you," I murmur. "And yes, I'd very much like to corrupt your taste in novels."

"You can't corrupt me. I'm the worst."

"That's what you think."

I refuse to let go of him after that, so we both settle on the bed side by side, reading our respective trashy romance novels. It's way cozier than the armchair. I read slowly to drag out this experience. I don't need expensive wines or hand-fed grapes or luxury to feel special. This is romance, the intimacy of this moment is what's truly special. Opening my heart and realizing the world is full of beautiful people whom I can fall in love with.

"You're perfect." The whisper is so quiet, that Lucien doesn't catch it. For the best, I guess. His ego doesn't need more inflation.

The crunch of paper echoes in the air as pages are turned. The few precious moments of silence are heaven.

"Um...what does 'his throbbing rod' mean?" Lucien asks all of a sudden.

My heart trips. That's not the question expected.

"It's his dick, Luci."

"That's what I thought, but I wasn't sure."

"Well, now you are."

I don't raise my head. I don't want to see his expression. Because I'm dangerously close to tipping over the precipice I've balanced against all this time. Once I fall, nobody can save me. My heart, the poor little organ, hasn't stopped bursting from excitement since I stepped into this apartment.

Luci leans close to me, until his mouth is inches from my ear. I'm in a new hell.

"This book is giving me ideas." Provocative. Tantalizing. "What happens after he rips her clothes off in their

bedchamber?”

My thighs clench. Wetness soaks my core. “Can’t remember...” I stammer, miraculously recalling the scene in question. “Read it a long time ago.”

“Shall I remind you?” Sweet Jesus. His tongue is licking my ear. “With your consent, of course.”

Lucien kisses a trail down the nape of my neck. Holy fuck. Shivers flutter all over my body like butterflies freed from a cage.

I’m made of volatile fuel waiting to combust. My eyes are about to twitch out of my eyeballs from the small, torturous pleasure spreading through my nerve endings. My thighs are slick with need.

I’m too far gone to stop myself from climbing on top of Luci, straddling his thighs and melding my lips to his. I grind against him, feeling the hardness of his arousal against his pants.

He blew my mind with his romantic gesture and now I want nothing more than to blow him off to show him how much I appreciate his thoughtfulness.

That’s what happens in the book, too. The Lord commands Elise to suck him, to make him come, and even though it’s Elise’s first time, she’s unbelievably pumped.

“Are you so eager to be ravished?” Lucien’s smile is pure sex, and it strokes the fire in my belly until it’s an inferno burning through my body.

Every clever retort I have dies a swift, silent death at the back of my mouth.

“Yes,” I reply.

“We don’t have to do it exactly like it’s written. Some of this is very rough, and if it’s too much for you—”

I lay a finger on his lips, silencing him. “No, do it exactly like that. I can take it.”

TWENTY

Lucien

I underestimated my strength. I didn't think her dress would actually tear so easily. Then again, Mira always buys the cheap stuff on sale so no wonder it's of poor quality.

"Did you just..." Her mouth hangs open in shock. She swallows, examining the ripped-up remains of her dress.

My eyes skim over her lithe, half-naked form. The curves of her breasts pouring out of her lacy bra and the wet spot in front of her panties. I press my thumb over her sex, pressing hard, convincing myself this is real. For years, I never thought this would happen. And now that it has, I still can't believe it.

"You love this." My voice is rough, hard. "Look how wet you are."

She answers with a purr. My cock jerks at the sound of it.

"Yes, I love it." Her eyes radiate heat and lust and temptation.

Heat explodes in my stomach. I read the scene in the book further as I unclasp her bra and cup her breasts, rubbing her nipples into hard peaks, kneading the soft mounds of her flesh until she's writhing in my arms, begging for more in a lovely, hoarse whisper. "Don't stop."

"You're the most beautiful thing I've ever seen." I yank away her panties and she exhales sharply.

I press my tongue over her peaked nipple. Her skin, warm and buttery, melts under my coaxing. Our gazes lock and the vulnerability in her eyes, the honest desire, and the way her skin heats at my touch makes my dick throb.

She arches her back, and picks up the book, reading quickly as if to familiarize herself with what's coming. Anticipation dilates her pupils.

"You still want to do this?" I ask again. "It isn't too late to change your mind."

"I'm doing it." Vehement. Emphatic.

I cradle her face in my hands. Her chin is tiny, her cheeks baby soft. I realize I've never held her like this.

"It'll never be too late to change your mind, even when we're in the middle of it," I remind her because this scene is intense even if it's sort of cheesy, and I'm getting a bit worried at the level of manhandling involved.

I don't want to hurt her, not even inadvertently.

"I'll tell you when to stop," Mira says. "Until then, don't."

I nod. Take a deep breath, mentally preparing myself. Then move her onto her back, pressing her body into the mattress. My knees come down on top of her knees, holding her in place. I caress the top of her head, letting my fingers glide to the ends of her hair.

"Your hair is like silk," I say, as my thumb coaxes her lips open. "And your lips are...heaven. Open them for me?"

My dick's punching a hole through my pants. I free the 'throbbing rod' from its confines and stuff it into her mouth without warning, pushing until I hit the back of her throat.

Mira makes a helpless sound. Tears spring in her big, luminous brown eyes. My heart misses beat. I loosen my grip, but she burrows her nails into my wrists, shaking her head.

Well, if this is what she wants, this is what she'll get.

Her mouth is divine, though. Sticky and wet and warm and tight. Pleasure shoots through me before I pull out. She

coughs.

“You make me feel like I own the world,” I read out the dialogue. It’s scary how close that is to how I actually feel in this moment. By giving up control, by opening up to me, she has made me feel deeply unworthy and deeply worthy at the same time. This power is like nothing I’ve ever experienced. And her expression—soft, curious, pleasure-hazed even as her cheeks grow wet and red—it stirs something deep inside me. She’s suffering for me. I didn’t ask her to, but she looks so damn beautiful while she does it.

I realize that the woman in the book is supposed to be a virgin and Mira isn’t, but there’s something so pure and angelic about her in this moment, in the way she sacrifices herself so gladly for my pleasure. The guilt that has laid buried in my soul erupts into a mass of seething chaos in my chest.

Should I even be doing this with her? We’re not even dating for real. This moment...her devotion...it’s imbued in something sacred. It should be saved for someone who is actually special and will treat her well and...I’m not sure what I am to her yet.

This purity nonsense is taking too much of a toll on me. But this is her romantic gesture, and she asked for it, and despite all the questions buzzing in my head, I know one thing for sure: that she wants this. And I must give her what she wants.

“I’ve never met someone like you,” I mumble. “You’re fire. Warm yet uncontrollably bright.”

Mira moans.

“Now suck me,” I command, squeezing her cheeks until her tongue darts out and circles the tip of my erection. “Show me how much you want this.”

“Oh...” Mira doesn’t put up any resistance. This is so different from the last time we had sex, when she was full of doubts and fought me at every step. Her reluctance was written on her skin. That was two weeks ago, but so much has changed between us in a short span of time.

If I didn't know better, I'd say Mira trusts me now. From the way her fingers are gently stroking the base of my dick, it's even possible she likes me. Or likes having sex with me, at least.

A shiver skates down my spine as she sucks me, alternating between licking and slow flicks of her tongue. Everything around us disappears into the background. The world is made of her sweet tongue on my dick. Of erotic sounds and throbbing sensations setting me on fire.

She's everything. This moment is everything. This doesn't even feel like sex. It feels like intimacy, like we're letting some coiled, hidden part of us unspool inside this room.

For your eyes only.

Mira takes my 'throbbing rod' (I think I've developed a fondness for that word) into her mouth. My entire body screams at me to let go. To allow the stars under my skin to explode into supernovas.

But I pull away from her wet paradise, cursing.

The story. I have to finish the scene before I come.

"Looks like I'll have to teach you how to do this properly," I say. I'm inwardly blushing at the crass words spilling from me. What has Mira turned me into? If not for her, I'd never do this. I'm glad she's enjoying it, at least. A telltale wicked smile raises the corners of her mouth.

"I'm sorry..." her voice trembles like a leaf in a storm. It's all an act, since she's almost laughing as she utters her apology. "I don't know—"

I clamp a hand over her mouth. "Just open your pretty mouth and let me do the rest. I'll make you my wife in every way."

As if being her fake boyfriend wasn't enough, now I'm her fake husband, too.

My wife.

I study her delicate features, her sharp cheekbones beaded with sweat, her lips reddened with exertion. Mira, so

unguarded and fully committed to what we're doing, doesn't seem to have registered that I'm now her fictional husband. She's looking up at me reverently with those glassy, tear-soaked eyes, like I'm an actual Viking king or something.

What have I gotten myself into? It's a thought that frequently pops up in my mind these days. And now, more than ever, I wish the answer would be something a little deeper than: sex for romance.

But there's no time to ponder while I'm half in the grip of an impending orgasm.

Mira blinks, her lips parted open. Tears form at the corners of her eyes when I ram my thick, hard cock into her tiny mouth. She yelps but doesn't stop me. Her focus and surrender only deepens. I exert my strength, driving her head deeper into the mattress with every thrust, bottoming out against the back of her throat every single time. Worry edges out my arousal when she gags. I pause to give her a break, but continue pounding into her at a slower pace when she moans.

Despite what she claims, I don't want to dislocate her jaw or see her get hurt. Maybe that's the doctor in me.

Her mouth molds perfectly around me, like it was made to be fucked like this. Heady pleasure sparks in my veins, snowballing into electricity that numbs me.

"Does it hurt, beautiful one?" I ask, brushing a thumb over her eyebrow. It's part of the plot.

My question elicits a pained moan.

"Bear with it." I squeeze her shoulder. "And then I'll show you the most exquisite pleasure."

There are more dialogues, but I've lost the ability to form words. The Viking Lord in the book must have a whole lot more stamina than me, if he has the energy to spout three more pages of dialogues.

I continue ravaging her mouth until I can no longer hold off the inevitable. My entire body tingles in anticipation for the final release. The sensations melt into each other, until

there's a flood of them rising under my skin, threatening to tear me open.

Then her sweet, wicked mouth breaks something deep inside me and I come, spilling into her mouth.

I peel off her face instantly, but Mira doesn't gag and throw up cum all over my carpet.

She swallows. All of it.

Fucking Jesus.

My eyes go wide, the blunt pressure in my chest sharpening into a painful, nameless ache.

"Why'd you do that?" I ask.

"What?" she asks innocently.

"No, never mind." She's definitely crazy. Why am I even debating that?

Breathless, I drop onto the mattress beside her. I'm drained by the intense experience we just had. It was mind-blowing, but it's the kind of mind-blowing that I can only tolerate in small doses.

Sweat clings to my skin. As does a deep sense of guilt and loss at what just happened. It seemed I...emotionally went to a place I didn't ever think I'd go to.

I turn to Mira's body resting beside me. Her eyes are half-mast, lidded and gorgeous, and hazed with satisfaction. It makes me feel...all kinds of things. Most of all, how much I want to be someone who is special to her like the Viking Lord is to the maiden.

We're in a fake relationship, I remind myself.

But this intimacy, this comfort, this warmth, the way we bared each other's souls just now doesn't feel fake. It feels disturbingly real. Just like the sharp, achy feeling in my chest.

The sex we just had wasn't normal sex. It has changed how I view myself...and how I view us. I've never done anything like it before. Don't think I ever will, with someone else. It feels like I just bared some part of me I didn't even

know I had to someone who did the same. I've always viewed my arch-rival as a competitive, prideful woman but there's so much to her beneath the surface.

I grab Kleenex from the nightstand and wipe her mouth. She doesn't seem particularly bothered by the fact that she looks like the main star of a porno. Then again, I think she still hasn't recovered from what happened.

I know I haven't. I still feel a little too exposed, a little too raw, a little too confused by what we did. I hadn't bargained on having sex during my so-called 'romantic gesture'. I definitely wasn't prepared for the kind of sex we had.

"That's all? What about the rest of the book?" Mira asks with a sharp arch of her eyebrow.

"Are you serious?" Judging by the eager expression on her face, the answer would be yes. I shake my head. "Give me some times. I'm still...processing."

She must be able to see the self-doubt that stains my face like black ink. She relents, and I'm grateful for the small kindness. For the time she's giving me to sort my shit out.

"Well, okay. Process, then," she says. "Or we can continue it another day."

"What? But we were just getting to the exciting part... exciting for you, at least."

"It's okay. You're right. I'm pretty drained, too." I know she's not drained at all, but she's being considerate.

"Does it hurt?" I ask. "Your jaw?"

"No, I'm fine," she replies. "Told you I'm not a delicate flower."

"There's nothing wrong with being delicate."

"There isn't, but I'm not." She drags herself upright. "By the way, I think I need a shower."

"The bathroom's that way." I point.

Mira gives me a thumbs up and disappears. I tidy up the books, change the sheets, and do other productive activities to

keep my thoughts off what's happening between us. I mean, what is happening between us? It sure as hell isn't just sex. Sometimes, I think I see a glimmer of longing and admiration and something indefinable, but then I open my mouth and it's gone. It's like a swinging pendulum. One second I'm certain she's warming up to me, then I'm not. I play this game over and over in my head, yes and no, maybe and maybe not, until it all starts to feel like a delusion.

Talk about mixed signals. I want to be aggressive, ask her straight up, but I'm not sure that'd get me anything. Mira can be very tight-lipped when her pride's on the line. I need to be sure before I act. I already blew my chances with her once. Can't afford a repeat of four years ago.

My racing train of thoughts break suddenly when Mira drifts out of the bathroom, steam and the scent of my shower gel swirling around her like mist. Her hair's wrapped in a towel and since I tore her clothes, she's only wrapped in a towel. Droplets of water cling to her skin like dew. My fingers grow heavy with the desire to wipe them away.

My stomach does a flip. Does she always have to look so...I don't know...blindingly beautiful? All I can do to calm my raging blood is to physically turn away from her.

"Um...do you have any clothes I can borrow?" her thin voice reaches my ears.

"One minute." I'm grateful for the chance to leave her presence.

I spend a long time looking for clothes she can go outside in without looking weird. When I return, she's sitting on the bed. I place the clothes next to her.

As I do, images of her wearing nice clothes—not my old T-shirt—surface in my mind. And I cannot, for the life of me, fathom why I so desperately want to see her dressed up. Maybe it's because I just saw a side of her that I never thought existed during sex. I'm curious about what else is hiding under the surface. Now that I think about it, I've never seen Mira in anything fancy.

“Are you free on the 15th of next month?” I blurt out suddenly, my tongue racing ahead of my mouth.

“I’m not sure.” Mira’s throat works. “Why?”

“It’s Uncle Henry’s birthday. Max’s throwing a huge party at their place. If you want to rub shoulders with celebs, I’ll be happy to take you.”

“What’s this all of a sudden?”

“Dunno; thought since we’re fake dating, you might as well benefit from it.” I know Max insisted that I bring Mira along, but I decided not to. Maybe I should let her make the choice for herself.

“I’m not big on celebrities. Who’ll be there?”

“Oh, you want a list?” I rattle off the names of all of Max’s close friends in the film industry—you know, just your average Oscar-winning, world-famous, directors, actors, singers, and entertainers.

Mira’s mouth gapes open bigger at every famous name. “All of them?”

“All of them.” I raise my gaze. She has just about managed to pick her jaw off the floor. It enters free fall once again when I tell her, “My parents will be there, too. As well as Uncle Henry, Max, and Ella. You’ve already met Ella before.”

“Wait. You want your fake girlfriend to fake-meet your parents?” she whispers-yells.

My lips bend into a smile. “You won’t be meeting them. You’ll be running into them by accident at the party.”

“Is there a difference? Either way, I’ll have to lie to them about being your girlfriend.”

“We’re lying to the whole world already.”

“But this is different. They’re your parents.”

“I don’t really care. I’m not close to them.”

“So you don’t mind lying?”

“Nope.”

“If you say so.”

“Is that a yes?”

“I suppose it’s all part of the fake dating experience,” Mira remarks in a resigned tone. “At least we’ll get some good pictures for Instagram.”

TWENTY-ONE

Mira

I've barely managed to calm myself down when my mother calls. Luci disappeared into the bathroom for a shower once he'd ironed out the details of our 'fake meet the parents/celeb event'. He tried to persuade me with shower sex, but my terror at the prospect of meeting his family has drained away any lust I had.

I splay my body over the sheets, twisting my legs between them. A familiar ringtone rents the air again.

Caller ID: Mom.

My stomach drops. Shit. I forgot today was Saturday.

Cradling the phone close to my ear, I gently drag the green icon, releasing a deep, feminine voice into my ears.

"They suspect it might be cancer." No hellos or anything. My mother's straightforward like that.

I let the news sink in, waiting for my rational brain to kick in and erase the painful knee-jerk response in my gut. I'm a doctor so I have a long and close association with bad news. But this rattles me more than I expected.

Strong emotions rise up like a tidal wave. I've already lost my father. Losing my only remaining family member would leave me with nobody. I'd be all alone. No one to call when I'm in trouble, or feeling upset, or when my life crashes and burns around me. No security. No insurance. My mother might

be critical, but she'll never abandon me. If something were to happen to me, she'd take care of me. And I'll do the same. Because that's what family means.

"Did they do a biopsy?" I ask, suppressing the fear burning the back of my throat.

"Next week," she informs. "Then we'll know for sure. There's no need for you to worry right now. Focus on your job. Don't think about this. You can't afford to be distracted at such an important time."

I realize that worrying about something that hasn't occurred isn't healthy or needed, but the deep sense of foreboding that has seized me in its grip refuses to go away.

"Should I come home? You can't be alone at a time like this."

My mother's tongue click is sharp and distinct, even while she's miles away. "Don't make a fuss over something that hasn't even happened."

"Send me your reports," I tell her. "Did you do any tests?"

She mumbles something, but my brain has tuned out. I'm too busy planning her funeral and imagining what the shattered pieces of my life will look like after that. I had planned to move back home once my fellowship was over, but if this turns out to be cancer, it leaves me no other choice. Will I be able to work while being a full-time caretaker? We don't have much money, so I can't afford to stay home.

Oh god, this is a disaster.

I've built an entire scenario in my head and no part of it looks good.

"I will be okay." My mother's strong voice shakes me out of my nightmares. "I grew up in a village. I've been bitten by snakes and stung by scorpions more times than you know and I survived it all."

"This isn't the same," I mumble. "Cancer's serious."

"The survival rates for cancers are high these days," my mother retorts. "I looked it up on WebMD. There's no need to

panic.”

“You can’t trust what WebMD says!” I yell. “We don’t know how far your cancer has spread. Or what stage it’s in.”

“We don’t even know if it’s cancer,” my mother reminds me, but I’ve already determined that it is. I’m going to be an orphan. I can see my sad, lonely life stretching ahead of me.

How could I have been so oblivious? Her voice has sounded different for a while. If only I’d called her sooner, called her more often, told her to visit the doctor earlier...

It’s all my fault. I’m a doctor but I can’t even pay attention to my own mother.

“Okay, calm down,” I say.

“I’m calm. You’re the one who needs to calm down,” my mother says. “You’ve always had a weak mind. Even small things affect you. You take everything personally.”

Can she not use this opportunity to find fault with me?

“I managed to become a cardiothoracic surgeon with my weak mind, so I say it’s good enough.”

“Hard work isn’t a substitute for mental strength.”

“Can you not criticize me right now?” I dig my nails into my thighs, irritation raking my insides. “I’m thinking of what to do.”

“Don’t do anything. You’ll make the situation worse.”

“Why don’t you have any faith in my abilities?”

“Because you never think clearly. You always get emotional and react quickly then regret later.”

My chest constricts. I hate that my mother has such a low opinion of my intelligence after everything I’ve achieved. What do I have to do to get her to acknowledge that I have two advanced degrees and I’m not an idiot? Sometimes, I think not even a blood sacrifice will do the trick. I’m at the end of the rope with my mother. For years, her tiny insults and undermining words have been a part of my life. But today, I can’t stand it. I’m so tired of being ‘less than’.

“Well, if you don’t want my help, do whatever you want. Bye.” I disconnect, angry and defeated at the same time.

I feel like a crumpled up piece of paper. I don’t know what to do.

But I know I can’t be with these thoughts or they’ll eat me alive.

Lucky for me, Lucien chooses that very moment to step out of the bathroom, smelling like roses and dressed in a clean pair of sweatpants and a clean sweatshirt. I throw my arms around him, canting up my head to brush my lips against his jawline, trying to entice him into another round of sex. Nothing else could consume my mind as completely as his touch.

It’s both a curse and a blessing.

But Luci’s more astute than he looks. He realizes something’s wrong.

“What happened?” he asks, prying my needy fingers away.

“My mother called.”

“And?”

“There’s bad news.”

His body stiffens like a wooden board under me. “How bad?”

“Well...”

I cling to him and tell him everything. My mother’s eye tumor. The fact that she keeps refusing my help. And how my life will be a disaster if something happens to her.

He laces his fingers through mine. “You’ll never be alone, Mira.”

I think Lucien still hasn’t completely stepped out of the romantic hero role yet. Or maybe he’s being nice. Offering empty platitudes. Whatever it is, it quells my irritation. I let my touch come off him because I don’t want to seem hysterical. He’s only my fake boyfriend and we had great sex

but now I'm pouring out all my woes to him. What's wrong with me?

"It's irrational." I swipe at the tears that I didn't even realize had tracked all the way down my cheeks. "I mean, I'm financially independent, grown up...and, parents die."

"That doesn't mean you're ready to let go of them," Luci replies.

I make a disgusted sound. "Know what's crazy? I don't even like my mother. We fight all the time."

"That doesn't mean you aren't important to her." Luci's hand curves around the small of my back and he's guiding me to the sofa in the living room. "Or that she isn't important to you."

Lucien tosses me a chocolate chip cookie from the kitchen. I guess he pays attention to what I drink and eat at work all day. I do love cookies, especially this brand. I take a big bite out of it, momentarily quiet. Beams of light refracted by Lucien's expensive chandelier stain my arms like luminescent raindrops.

"In my culture, it isn't about love," I tell myself. "It doesn't matter whether or not I love my mother or she loves me. All that matters is that we do our duty by looking after each other."

"But you're not happy with that," Lucien surmises before I can explain further. "You want her to love you."

"I'm the emotional type. I can't stand dry, practical relationships. Sometimes, I feel like my mother doesn't like me, just tolerates me because I'm her only child."

"I doubt that's the case." Luci's thumb massages the base of my neck. "It's harder for parents to lie to their children than you think."

"I want to be appreciated for who I am and who I'm trying to be. Instead, my mother criticizes me all the time. I'm never good enough for her. I'm a heart surgeon but she complains about my lack of ambition."

“*Your* lack of ambition?”

“Exactly.” I say around a mouthful of cookies. “Can you believe it? And she thinks I’m antisocial because I’m not a social climber who makes connections to get ahead in life.”

“You are antisocial.” Lucien nods. “I’m your only friend.”

“You’re not my friend,” I correct. “You’re my fake boyfriend,”

“Tomato, tomato.”

I sink into the back of his plush, upholstered sofa. A clock ticks away in the distance. I’ve been at Luci’s place for three hours. Where did all that time go? And why do I feel so irritated at the thought of leaving?

“You must think I’m from another planet,” I say. “Your mother sounded wonderful on the phone. So warm and supportive of your life choices. No wonder you’re so confident all the time.”

Lucien’s eyebrows knit together. “My mother? Warm? No way. Even her colleagues call her an ice queen behind her back.”

“At least she doesn’t keep telling you you’re an idiot and questioning if you have the ability to perform basic tasks.” Like cooking. And deciding how to live my life. And where to work.

“For what it’s worth, I’ve never thought that you lacked confidence,” Lucien says.

A hard-edged laugh bursts from my mouth, transforming into something brittle and bitter inadvertently. “Shows how well you know me. I’m totally insecure on the inside. I’ve never been told by my mother that I was smart, talented, or hard-working. I’m desperate for validation. I’m not like you. People don’t fall head over heels in love upon first meeting me.”

“Well, *you* didn’t fall head over heels upon first meeting me,” Luci argues.

“I did.” Before I can register the fact that my tongue tripped, the words are out in the world, blooming like a stain in the air that I can’t scrub off. I attribute it to my emotional distress. I spy Luci’s surprised expression and it sets loose a swarm of butterflies in my stomach. Before this can escalate, I backpedal. “Of course, everything changed the moment I found out what you’re really like.”

“You mean you fell deeper in love with me after you realized what a wonderful person I am?”

Yes.

I gape at his face. Love. It’s the first time he has uttered that word. Maybe my romance novels are rubbing off on him. Moreover, he looks exactly like a romance hero right now, holding my hand gently, listening to my troubles, eyes radiating warmth and understanding.

A cold fist crushes my heart. If only he could be mine. If only this was real.

The echo of disappointment reverberates through my ribs. I close my eyes, rubbing away my fanciful thoughts. One nice gesture from him and it’s gone to my head. I’m so pathetic. I have no standards at all. I need to start listening to those subconscious self-worth affirmations on Youtube ASAP.

“You really have a very high opinion of yourself.” I smirk.

Luci’s Adam’s apple bobs with the swallow. I can see the thin trickle of sweat gliding down his neck. Either that’s steam from the shower or he’s very nervous. “Mira, tell me something. Honestly.”

A sudden pause. Luci’s gaze drops to my feet like he can’t bear to watch me anymore. He twists his body awkwardly. “Was it me?”

“Was what you?” I echo, befuddled by this poorly worded question. Someone teach Luci basic English grammar, please.

“Did you like me during our residency? I haven’t been able to stop thinking about what you said that day.”

Breath swooshes out of my lungs. My heart takes off like a rocket to outer space. The impulse to deny everything, to cover lies with more lies is strong. But when I see the way Lucien's fingers are shaking, I can't bring myself to do it. I can't lie to protect my pride anymore.

"I assumed you already knew that." I shrug. "Guess you're not a genius after all."

Lucien does a double-take. The lines of his body relax. He kneads his forehead.

My throat is a blocked pipe full of heavy, deep questions. I really want to ask him: do you like me, too? Is there a chance this could be real? But I've already exposed so much of myself today: my sexual fantasies, my hobbies, my insecurities. And he hasn't even told me he likes me. If I push forward with asking him if he likes me, if he wants to date me for real, he'll assume I'm looking for a serious relationship. All that awaits me from that point on is avoidance. Luci hates cumbersome women.

"Do you still like me?" Lucien's voice is quiet.

I do. Despite how impossible it seems. Luci's a grade-A snob and asshole with a gigantic ego who constantly provokes me for no reason, and I'm not the type to go for toxic relationships like that, but tell that to my heart. Because it races every time he does the teeniest, tiniest nicest thing for me. Like accompanying me for morning runs, buying me an expensive dinner to celebrate a successful surgery or taking my shifts when I have family problems, or just talking to me every day. For some reason, he's always there when I need someone to have my back. Even though he's definitely NOT a friend.

"Dunno. A lot has happened between then and now," I reply, the good memories blurred by the ugly times. He has broken my heart in a hundred different ways with a hundred different women. I've lost to him, won against him yet I feel bitterly defeated at the end of it all.

"So there's a chance you could like me in the future?"

“Do you want me to?”

“Yes. Because I like you.” His straightforward confession surprises me. This isn’t like him. He likes to protect his ego and play games. But this is refreshing. I don’t want to believe that he’s serious because Luci is just shallow but the way he’s watching me with unblinking interest, I know he can’t be such a good liar.

“Well...” I twirl a strand of hair around my finger. “If you keep being nice to me, there might be a chance I’ll come to like you, too.”

Lucien’s mood perks up before I drag it down a notch. “But don’t get your hopes up too much. We only have a few months left.”

“Did you forget, I’m an overachiever?”

“We’ll see about that...” I drift off when his mouth melds into mine.

I let him kiss me because it feels like heaven, and I’ve gotten over the bitterness of letting him win.

Defeat doesn’t always have to sting.

TWENTY-TWO

Lucien

Early the next morning, I run through my AATS competition presentation in Dr. Burns's office. With his messy hair and droopy eyelids, he looks like someone threw him out of bed at the break of dawn against his will. The strands of brown hair sticking up straight on his head are still rebelling.

I feel so bad for him that I give him the chocolate chip muffin I bought. He must be out of it because he accepts without protest. I wonder what he did last night. Probably stayed up late writing a paper or watching Netflix. I take a snapshot of the tired, worn-out program director in my mind. This is going to be my life twenty years later. I just hope I'm fortunate enough to have wonderful fellows like myself working for me.

"You can start presenting," he says, yawning. "I know you have procedures lined up all morning."

My life is a performance so I have no problem with public presentations. If anything, I'm disappointed that my audience consists of just one person. I picture how it'll be at the competition, with hundreds of surgeons in attendance. I live for attention like that, but now, it doesn't stir a single spark of excitement in me.

Throughout the presentation, what Mira said yesterday plays in my brain like a Spotify playlist on a loop.

So there's a chance you could like me in the future?

If you keep being nice to me, there might be.

A burst of elation shot through me when she said that. All my life, I've thought there was no hope. I was wrong. The impossible can happen. I can make it happen.

All night, I stayed up planning the next grand romantic gesture. Disneyland? Paris? London? A trip to the South Pole? Mira's birthday is in a month. I could throw a birthday party for her at my parents' townhouse in East village.

Then there's this bookstore I found that sells old romance novels. She would like that.

"A case of lung cancer coupled with a compromised immune system due to..." It's a good thing I rehearsed the presentation a million times beforehand because my mind's in a different world right now. I'm speaking on autopilot.

It's funny how Dr. Burns nods along, completely unaware of the fact that he's my fairy godmother. Thanks to him, Mira and I started fake dating and it has given me an opportunity to know her better and discover things I'd never have discovered otherwise.

"It's looking good," is Dr. Burns's verdict, before he launches into a discussion on the finer points of my presentation. I type his suggestions into my iPad. I'll fix those issues later today, when I have free time.

"Is there anything else you'd like to say?" I ask once he falls silent.

"I've seen a lot of presentations in my time, but yours looks like it has a good shot at winning." He clears his throat. "I hope you don't let that go to your head."

He's underestimating just how strong my ego is. Plus, a compliment from him means a lot to me. I've looked up to Dr. Burns ever since I became a fellow here. Unlike the doctor who supervised me during residency at my father's hospital, Dr. Burns doesn't play favorites. He's a fair man, a patient surgeon, and there have never been any rumors surrounding him except that his marriage broke down because of his erratic

work schedule. Trust me, the staff here knows everything. They could give the FBI a run for their money.

“I’ll do my best at the competition,” I say, before making a quick and quiet exit from his office.

I let out a big breath in the corridor, then scurry back to my computer to update my presentation. An hour later, it’s time to wash my hands before a procedure. Time really flies around here. At home, I spend hours worrying over Mira and my relationship and my future, and it feels like decades sometimes.

My procedure shoes make soft, damp sounds against the floor. Clara, who is wandering next to the restrooms, looks up and waves at me.

“Did you and Mira get up to something fun during the weekend?” she asks coyly, the insinuation clear as day.

“Why do you ask?”

“She’s very upbeat today. Thought something nice may have happened.”

Heat stains my cheeks, spreading like a bad rash. My neck grows hotter and I make the most graceful getaway possible by gliding backward to avoid answering. As I said, the staff at this hospital can give the FBI a run for their money.

As I slip into an operating gown, my mind’s still chewing on how I’ve finally, for once in my life, managed to make Mira happy instead of irritated. I think we’re making a lot of progress these days, which is great since I need to melt her cold, guarded heart as soon as possible. Already, the six months until the end of the fellowship feel like a ticking time bomb. If I lose this opportunity, I may never get another chance. I already blew my shot once.

My chaotic, bumbling thoughts dissolve into silence the moment I step into the operating room. Nothing empties my mind like surgery. There’s no room for distractions when one’s dealing with people’s lives.

The procedure is short. It ends successfully. When I turn on my phone after talking to the patient’s wife to assure her

that all's well, there's a text message from Mira asking me to meet up with her at a Mexican restaurant three blocks away at lunchtime.

As soon as I finish my third procedure for the day, I patter down the stairway, my long legs eating up big expanses of the sidewalk. The restaurant that Mira indicated is sandwiched between a Duane Reade and a dry cleaner. It has a casual vibe, with brick walls inside, and 'Hola' written in bold, colorful lighting. Pendant lights suspended over the bar cast a yellow-orange glow on my head. I locate Mira in a booth toward the back, right next to the kitchen.

Her back is plastered against the wall, eyes glued to her phone. A bowl of nachos alongside smaller bowls of guacamole, salsa, and refried beans sits at the center of the table, beckoning me toward it with its comforting, salty smell.

I tap the table to announce my arrival as I slide into the seat opposite Mira's.

"Don't tell me this is a date." I smile wryly, relishing the panicked expression that flickers over Mira's features when she bobs her head up and finds me there in the flesh. Caught her red-handed, didn't I? "Because if it is, your courtship game needs work."

"Don't let your imagination run wild, Luci," she bites out. "I'm only buying you a meal because you were nice to me."

"Nice, how?" I don't remember being especially nice to Mira anytime in the last forty-eight hours. We had sex where I practically abused her, though it was done with her consent and the best of intentions. I don't know what her definition of nice is.

My fake girlfriend twirls one finger around a lock of her thick, charcoal hair. Hesitates. "Thank you for listening to me...rant about my mother yesterday."

"You weren't really ranting."

"I was," she assures in a tone that brooks no argument.

I bow. "Well, I live to please."

“How was your presentation?” Mira switches the topic, pouring water from the big glass bottle on the table into my glass. I cross my arms, fascinated by her assumption that I drink tap water.

“Dr. Burns thinks it’ll win me the prize,” I say.

Her shoulders tremble with a nervous laugh. “Is that why your ego is so chipper today?”

“My ego isn’t a separate entity with its own emotions and moods,” I inform her.

“Now that’s where you’d be wrong.” She sips water, reading the menu leisurely like it’s the newest issue of *Cosmopolitan*. “Pick something to eat, Luci.”

I’m not hungry, but she’s made all this effort to call me out on a faux-date, so I feel obligated to order the most expensive item off the menu. Just to let her know I’m serious about this, too. Yeah, I know we have a messed up way of communicating. I’d like to change that someday.

“How’s your mom?” I inquire, once our orders have been placed. I can’t ignore the way Mira keeps tapping her feet and cracking her knuckles. That’s not her baseline.

Mira shakes her head. “No news. She hasn’t had her biopsy yet.”

“By the way, I told my aunt you’re coming to Henry’s birthday party. It’s at the Ritz-Carlton on the 15th of February.”

“Ritz-Carlton! You never told me that.” She pats her fingers on the blue pants of her scrubs. It leaves behind moist prints. She’s sweaty. “Wait. Do I need to wear something special?”

“Just the fanciest thing you own.”

“The fanciest thing I own is a gray pantsuit I bought for my fellowship interview,” she replies, deadpan.

I jerk in surprise. I know Mira’s all about work and studies, but I thought she at least owned a dress. Don’t all girls have one?

“Then we need to buy you something fancier,” I say.

“We? Since where has there been a we?”

“Since now.”

I don't care about what my parents or anyone else thinks of her fashion choices, but I'm suddenly gripped by the urge to see her all dressed up, looking different from her usual style. I want to see her in a dress that hugs the sexy contours of her body like a glove, want to kiss lipstick-soaked red lips and get smudged stains all over my face. Heat floods my body as my vision progresses further, to us making out on the couch, me peeling the dress off her, running my hands along the smooth fabric...

I push back my thoughts before they give me a boner in the middle of the restaurant. Mira's a natural beauty, so she doesn't need much to make her shine. I have no doubt she'll look like a bombshell with nice clothes and makeup.

A cold sigh wrapped in the scent of salsa tickles my throat.

“How fancy is ‘fancier’? Because I'm trying to save money for my mother's surgery.”

“Don't worry about money,” I say.

She nods. “They sell cheap stuff at TJ Maxx. Maybe I'll try going there tonight before I forget.”

“I know a better place,” I volunteer.

“Really? You?” Disbelief oozes out of Mira's pores. I don't blame her. “Your shoes cost more than my monthly rent.”

“I promise it's a great place. I'll take you. We can go after work today.”

“I'm free,” Mira agrees.

“Great. By the way, we'll also need to buy shoes to go along with the dress. My mother's pretty detail-oriented.”

And so am I.

“Why do I feel like I’m going to make a fool of myself at this party? Maybe I can feign a migraine on the day of.” She rubs her forehead like she’s massaging away a headache. I assumed she was nervous because of her mother’s situation, but could it be that she’s afraid of meeting my parents?

“Come on. There’s no reason to be so terrified.”

Mira drains another glass of water.

“I didn’t know anything about your parents, so I googled them yesterday.” She assesses my reaction through wide obsidian eyes. Did she think I’d be bothered by her digging up information on my parents? Honestly, I’m surprised she didn’t do it before. “They’re so successful and influential. What if they figure out I’m your fake girlfriend using their parental intuition?”

“Trust me, they don’t have any of that.”

“Luci, this isn’t the time for jokes.” She throws her fists down on the table, rattling the forks, knives, and plates. “I’m going out of my mind wondering if this is going to affect my reputation in the medical profession. Your father is friends with Dr. Burns. Don’t you see how dangerous this is? We’re playing with fire.”

She’s getting wound up over nothing but I can’t blame her. She doesn’t know my parents. They neither comprehend nor care for the difference between a real relationship and a fake performance put on for the sake of others. Their relationship is faker than ours. At least our sex life is with each other.

I realize Mira and I have come a long way when I pat her head and she doesn’t flinch or even comment on my overly familiar gesture. “Easy. They won’t judge you,” I say. “They’ll be too busy berating each other to focus on you.”

“Huh?”

“My parents argue. A lot. You’ll be shocked at some of the stuff they say to each other.”

“But…” Mira stutters. “...haven’t they been married a long time?”

“Marriage is simply a legal contract. It’s not a guarantee for happiness or fulfillment if the people in the relationship don’t want to work with each other.”

“Is that why you don’t do long-term relationships?” Mira’s question catches me off guard. “I’m not talking about marriage, Luci. I’m talking about relationships, period.”

“No, that’s not why,” I say. “It’s because I haven’t found someone I’m interested in.”

Mira’s lips curl into a disgusted frown. “I wonder if such a person exists out there. The mythical creature who can win Luci’s heart—which was sold to the devil decades ago.”

Yes, she does. And she’s right here. I keep my thoughts to myself.

I pat the corners of my mouth with a paper napkin.

“My parents almost divorced when I was nine,” I tell her. I’ve never told anyone about this. Never been close enough to. I don’t like talking about my parents, or about how frustrated I felt growing up, but I’m ready to do anything to put Mira’s mind at ease about the upcoming meeting. “Dad moved out of our house. I went to live with Uncle Henry. Mom even changed my name to Lucien Stone in anticipation of getting custody.”

“So that’s why you have your mother’s name,” Mira remarks, scooping up guacamole with a nacho. “I always thought it was because your father was a feminist. Against the patriarchy. Equal rights and all that.”

I cough because it’s so funny I can’t hold it in. “My Dad’s the farthest thing from a feminist. He fucks around with women half his age, and most of them are staff at his hospital or the clubs he frequents.”

Mira’s face goes rigid as a stone statue. Her mouth hangs half-open, lips formed in the shape of a word, but growing, thick silence is all her vocal cords produce. She seals her mouth into a thin line.

Moments later—

“Does your mom know?” A quiet, halting whisper. Her eyes are big, wide, helpless full moons, looking for something to stare at except me.

“Of course, she knows,” I reply. “Why do you think she tried to divorce him?”

“But she didn’t, in the end.”

“Because she’s insecure and fearful. She didn’t want to die alone and she didn’t think she’d be able to find another man with the same status as my father. All her life, people have told her she isn’t the kind of woman anyone would marry. So the fact that she’s with someone successful and desirable is a matter of pride for her.”

“Isn’t she afraid he’ll leave her?” Mira asks.

“He won’t,” I say. “He’s just as insecure and fearful as her. He may sleep with young women to bolster his ego, but inside, he’s scared they’re judging him for his age and will grow bored of him.”

My parents are a match made in heaven. Two insecure, materialistic people who want nothing real. To make things worse, they compete with each other all the time over me, probably because they realize my love is the only real love they’ll ever have in this lifetime. Not that I love them. Or ever will.

“My parents aren’t who you think they are,” I continue, placing my hand over Mira’s on the table. “There’s more to them than their star-studded LinkedIn profiles. They’re petty, selfish, and shallow. It wasn’t fun growing up with them.”

“I’m not trying to judge you, but your life sounds like a soap opera,” Mira says.

“Does that mean I have main character vibes?”

“Don’t fish for compliments.” Mira raises her hands, stretching her muscles.

At that moment, our food arrives and we dig in. Mira’s the type who doesn’t talk much when she’s eating, so apart from the occasional jibe and complaint about how this meal’s going

to damage her monthly budget, she focuses on relishing the meal.

She pays for the food when we're done, patting her food bump as she waddles out of the restaurant. She ate five times as much as me and drank a whole bottle of water, so it's no surprise she moves like a fish flopping out of water.

"I like the food here," she says. "Maybe I'll come back sometime."

"With me?" I inquire, hopeful.

She nods. "But I'm not paying for you."

My mouth stretches into a smile without my consent.

As far as first dates go, I'd give this one a ten out of ten.

TWENTY-THREE

Mira

Here's what I get for trusting Lucien: a trip to Saks Fifth Avenue. Expensive perfume scents the air as I scurry amidst a crowd of people, all of whom look like they have more money than me. When Lucien said he knew a place that sells cheap clothes, I should've known he meant cheap by his standards.

"You brought me here just to show off, didn't you?" My eyes narrow at him as I riffle through the rack of clothes on the top floor. They're pretty and a little window shopping won't hurt my wallet. But when I read the price on the tag, my head feels faint. "Two thousand dollars? Are you serious? I'll have to get a loan to afford this."

"Or you could let me buy it for you," Lucien offers.

"I'm not accepting expensive gifts from you." My fingers linger a little too long on the floral-patterned shift dress even after my shoulders have sunk at the price tag. I reign in my wild desire to wear pretty clothes. "You're my fake boyfriend, not my sugar daddy."

Lucien blocks my path as I try to strut to the escalators. Maybe the clothes on the lower floors are cheaper? I can hope. "Have you ever had a sugar daddy?"

"What?" I jerk toward him abruptly. "No. Why would I?"

"Just asking."

“I’m poor, not desperate,” I retort, sparing a final glance at the ‘dress that got away’, when Luci grabs my hand.

“Why don’t you try it on?” he coaxes. “It’s free to try.”

I scratch a deep line into my wrist with my nail. “What if I end up loving it?”

“Then I’ll buy it for you.”

“No, thanks.” My pride can’t take a blow of that level. As it is, I’ve been thrown off-kilter by my feelings toward Luci. There’s no need for more confusing niceties from him. Everything he does only makes me like him more and I know he wants me to like him, but I’m scared to. My feelings for him have been my greatest source of stress for the last sixteen years.

“It’ll be my grand romantic gesture,” Lucien offers. “A shopping trip.”

I howl in laughter. “You might as well be my sugar daddy if you’re willing to drop two grand on a dress to sleep with me.”

“Then I’ll be your sugar daddy for tonight.” A sly grin curves over his face.

I swivel awkwardly. “Oh, please. You’re a decade too young for that. And too poor. Most sugar daddies are multimillionaires but you make the same salary as me.”

“You seem to know a lot about the trends in this industry.” Lucien’s thumb dips into the curve where my neck meets my shoulder. Sweat pours from my skin like a waterfall. Dread is a sharp flint stuck in my throat.

“Regardless.” I swallow hard, fighting temptation. “I can’t let you spend your parents’ money on me after you told me you don’t even like them.”

“I’m not spending my parents’ money. I’m spending the trust fund my grandfather left me,” Lucien clarifies with a casual shoulder roll. “So don’t feel too bad for me.”

Blame it on my weak will and my perennial hunger for things I cannot have, but I fold. It’s a bit of fun after a day at

work. It won't hurt anyone.

I pluck Lucien's hand away from me. "I'll try the dress but I'm not doing it for you."

I remove a few dresses gently from the rack, cradling them like they're precious diamonds. Some of them won't break my bank, though at \$500, even the cheapest is going to pinch my bank account.

I have no intention of buying anything. I want to feel expensive and luxurious for a bit; that's all. One of the salesgirls shows me to the dressing room. Lucien plonks himself on a chair outside, rubbing his hands together as if warming up.

If nothing else, at least the dresses showcase my newly-minted athletic figure well enough to incite envy from Luci. But when I shimmy into the first outfit—a silk belted shirtdress—I realize it's not his envy I want anymore. I want him to desire me. As more than just someone to sleep with.

In the private confines of the dressing room, I skim my hands over the baby-soft material that glides over my curves, flattering my coloring like it was tailor-made for me. The hem hits my knee, leaving my long, fawn legs bare. I don't have the appropriate footwear for this kind of attire. My white sneakers don't go with something so luxe.

I pivot on my heel. My reflection splashed across the long mirror drives the breath from my lungs. I'm not emotionally prepared for this sight and even less emotionally prepared for the feelings that crop up. My heartstrings are whining in joy. I rotate around, surveying my right side, then my left, then my back.

Excuse me, but I look fabulous. Like me, but an upgraded, richer, bougier version of me. I'm intoxicated by the vision of 'me' I see in the mirror. A me who looks like she has lived an easy life. A better life. Someone who can be Luci's equal in every way.

I fist my hands around the gossamer fabric. For the first time in my life, I think I've fallen in love with a dress. I know

it sounds ridiculous considering I cannot afford it, but I don't own a single garment that makes me look as beautiful, polished, and utterly, effortlessly chic as this one dress does. I must own it. Maybe I can get a payment plan. Don't all department stores have those?

I dip, knees bending then push back the curtain and stride out. Lucien glances up at me instantly. A harsh, inscrutable look filters into his ocean eyes. His eyebrows rise, wide little Vs creasing the smooth plane of his forehead.

"You had better think very carefully before criticizing this dress," I warn him. "Because I think I may have fallen in love with it."

"How lovely. It looks amazing on you," the salesgirl coos. "You have a great figure."

A guttural, harsh sound cuts through her wispy voice.

"Yeah, you look ravishing." Lucien's smile is pure wicked seduction as I survey myself in the mirror. Every visible inch of my skin is on fire at the way he rakes his gaze over my reflection, visually undressing me.

I press a hand to my stomach to calm down the wild horses stampeding inside it.

"We'll get this one." Lucien fingers through the credit cards in his wallet. Wait, why does he have so many?

"No." I lunge to rip Lucien's wallet from his hands. "I'll get the dress on a payment plan. With my own money."

"Of course. Our payment plans offer a lot of flexibility," the salesgirl suggests. "The first four payments are interest-free and the payment period is flexible. All you need is a debit card. I can check and let you know if you'll be approved."

"Please do." Fighting the clutter in my purse, I locate my debit card and hand it over to the salesgirl.

"Yes, this should be approved as long as you have a positive credit history." She launches into a long description of how a credit check may be performed to check that I don't have too many debts and how it won't affect my financial

standing if I choose to pay in four bi-weekly installments or within a month. Since I only get paid every month and went to med school on a full scholarship (that's why I picked NYU) I don't have any debt.

When the salesgirl disappears, I change back into my old clothes and remerge with my new silk dress.

"You know, I'm glad we started fake dating," Lucien loops his hand around my hips. "I never thought I'd see you in a dress."

"If I end up with an addiction to designer clothes, it'll be your fault," I mumble, shouldering through the shoppers. "But I suppose it doesn't hurt to have a fake boyfriend like you."

"Why? Because I'm handsome?"

Because you're the only one I care about. The thought springs out of nowhere, bringing with it a cold stab in my stomach.

"Because you have good taste," I say.

Lucien cups a palm over his open mouth. "Hold on. Was that a compliment?"

"It can be anything you want it to be." I wink, then skip across to the counter to pay for my life's first designer dress.

I didn't think I'd ever be able to see the bright side of fake dating Lucien, but the experience has opened my mind to a lot of different things. I've changed little by little in just a few weeks since we became more than rivals.

And, as the pleasant weight of the Saks Fifth Avenue bag settles in my hands, I can't wait to find out what else is about to change for me.

On Thursday night, I lay next to Lucien on his bed, our fingers linked together. I've been coming over to his place a lot without reason. He cooked me dinner yesterday and I invited myself here today under the pretense of helping him iron out his oral presentation for the competition. But all we've done is spoon together under the sheets and stare at each other's faces.

Neither of us manages to bring up the subject of the presentation for the rest of the night. Time melts, pops, and dissolves like bubbles. I have a hundred and one million tasks to accomplish, but wasting time in silence next to my fake boyfriend feels like the most urgent item on my list. Lucien's skin feels divine beneath mine. The intimacy of this moment feels precious, and fragile. Like any tiny sound could destroy it.

The crumpling of sheets percolates my senses. Lucien's body wriggles. His evening stubble tickles my knuckles as he turns his head. "Can I turn off the lights? I want to show you something."

All the brightness in the room is sucked out the instant he flicks the lamp switch. Cool, comfortable darkness washes over our bodies and I cling to his hand tighter, suddenly aware that I'm excited at the thought of being alone with him in the dark. My bare legs are tangled with his, his hipbone digging into my back.

It takes a while for my eyes to adjust, but when they do, tiny illuminations on the ceiling creep across my vision. Spreading across the room like luminescent freckles, their soft glow bears down on me.

"Are those glow-in-the-dark stars?" I whisper, impressed by how many constellations I can count.

"Yeah. You like them?"

I giggle. "Are you a kid?"

"They're cool no matter how old you are."

"I guess so."

An invisible pressure swells in my chest, but before I can examine it too closely, the harsh sound of my ringtone blasts through the air.

I rip out my phone from my pocket, fingers shaking, hoping it's my mother. When I read the caller ID and it's indeed her, panic coils around me like a poisonous snake. The suspense of her diagnosis has had me on edge all week. It may be the reason I've started spending so much time with Lucien—because I can't bear to be alone in my studio with my doom and gloom thoughts for company.

"Hello, Mom?" I sound anxious as fuck. I need to modulate my voice before I scare my mother.

"It's not cancer. It's just a benign tumor." The very first line sends relief surging through my system. I curl my toes into the dry sheets. Thank goodness. "But I need to get surgery to remove it. I've decided it's better to do it sooner rather than later, so I've scheduled it for Sunday. You'll have the day off then."

"That's great," I say, kneading my cheeks. "If it's a regular surgery, you'll recover in a few weeks. I'll stay there and look after you until then. I'll talk to Dr. Burns. Don't worry—"

"I'll be fine—"

"Oh, please." I tut. "You won't be allowed to eat regular food or talk for two weeks once you've had the surgery. Trust me on this. I'm a doctor."

I can feel my mother's incoming protest sliding across my neck like a cold knife, but in the end, she only grunts. "Okay. But if I feel well before that, you can go back."

I pump my fist. Her acceptance feels like a huge victory. Does she finally trust my expertise after all these years? Maybe after our previous phone call, she did some thinking and realized I was right after all.

"Of course. I'll be there on Saturday," I assure, my ego feeling bigger than Luci's in this moment. I've achieved the impossible—my mother's respect.

“It’s not a big deal,” my mother says. “Don’t sound so worried.”

“I’m not worried.”

“In that case, go to sleep. It’s eleven, why are you still awake?”

She hangs up, promising to email me all her reports and test results so I can look over them. No niceties at all. But I don’t mind because everything’s alright. I’m not going to end up alone in the world. My life won’t crumble to dust anytime soon.

I close my eyes, letting the darkness soothe me, inhaling the nicest, most comforting smells—musky men’s body wash and lily-scented fabric softener. The world is a perfect place right now.

I brush a thumb across Luci’s cheekbone. “My mother’s getting surgery on Sunday but it’s not cancer.”

“Good news finally.” Lucien nuzzles me, his lips caressing my chin in a soft kiss. His unexpectedly romantic action sends a tingle down to the tip of my toes. “Are you alright?”

“Yeah...” Words dry up, choked out by emotions too strong to tame.

His arm crushes my shoulders until I’m wrapped tightly in his embrace.

The pressure in my chest from before returns.

I’m just so happy right now.

TWENTY-FOUR

Lucien

The hospital feels different the next day. Maybe that has something to do with the fact that Mira is not there. This is not the first time she has been absent, but her absence aches like an open gash.

I know she went back home to take care of her mother. And we've been keeping in touch with messages, though she's terrible at replying to mine on time.

For example, I sent her a simple message: *Are you alright?*

And she replied four hours later with *Busy*.

Her scent lingers in the air around me even though she's not here. I carry out my procedures flawlessly but without the motivation of running into Mira in the hallway and watching the gleam in her eyes when I tell her I've finished another transplant; I'm not as driven as I usually am.

Now that I think about it, it was never about showing off. It was always about sharing my success with someone who would understand how much each victory meant to me.

"Lucien," Amir summons me across the hallway in the afternoon. "Are you ready for tomorrow's competition?"

I startle at the question. I was so busy fretting over Mira's mother's surgery tomorrow that I forgot that's the day of the AATS case report competition. This means I need to wake up early and board a flight to Boston. The very notion sounds

energy draining. I'm still excited about the competition, but my mind has been elsewhere ever since Mira left.

“Buy me a Boston Cream Pie and cannolis from Boston.” Amanda stretches her hands as we at the end of our workday. “I've always wanted to try authentic local cuisine.”

“I don't have space in my luggage for so much food,” I say wryly.

“Then make space.”

I open my mouth to tell her I can't when my reply is broken by another message on my phone.

Mira: I don't think I can do this. My mother's making such a fuss. I can't stand it.

Me: What's wrong?

Mira: She doesn't want to get the surgery at the scheduled time because she says the hour is inauspicious.

Me: Why?

Mira: Some astrology/planetary mumbo jumbo.

Mira: And she won't listen to reason.

Me: Can she get it later in the day?

Mira: Absolutely not. I won't give in to her ridiculous excuses.

Me: Alright.

Mira: The surgery's tomorrow morning. So I have twelve hours to convince her.

Me: Have you tried bribing her with something she likes?

Mira: We're not talking right now.

Me: Try texting, then?

Mira: Also, she's not a kid. I can't bribe her.

Me: In my experience, all parents are weak to something.

The thread of messages stops there. A blue tick appears next to my last text but when I slip my phone into my pocket,

it doesn't buzz with an incoming text.

I scratch the back of my neck, worry prickling in my throat. Mira doesn't have the greatest relationship with her mother and gets stressed easily. I think this surgery may be more difficult for her than for her mother. Her standards for herself are too high and she's so desperate to be liked. People-pleasing never brought anybody happiness, at least not that I know of.

"So what's going on with you two?" Amanda's voice perforates my bubble of thoughts.

Uncertainty leaps up in my chest like an unwelcome heart attack. "Nothing."

"You seem worried for Mira."

"Isn't that only natural?"

Amanda skips ahead and then looks back with a sharp expression. "Not for you."

"Amanda, I'm shocked you have such a low opinion of me."

"If we're talking about my opinion, I think you two should start dating for real. It's painful watching this half-assed attempt at resistance."

I've considered it before. Taking things further. Making them real. But I'm not sure if she feels the same. She doesn't even like me yet. Things aren't how they used to be between us. In the last week alone, there has been a shift in our dynamic. I no longer think of Mira as an unattainable princess ferreted away in an unbreakable fortress. She seems like someone I can casually invite to dinner and she'll accept instead of looking at me like I'm plotting homicide.

But the thing is, we're fake dating, and I'm afraid the whole notion of 'fake romance' has made Mira too excited. I'm not entirely sure if she's feeling anything for me or if she's just swept up by the unreality of it all. If there's no 'fakeness' to shield us anymore, no ready-made expiry date on our relationship, will she suddenly realize that a real relationship

isn't possible with me after all? That I'm still, in many way, the same guy she rejected years ago.

"I don't think she'll date me for real," I confess. "She wants romance and grand love and I'm...not sure that's me."

"I can't tell you what to do," Amanda says. "But you'd both benefit immensely from forgetting about your past and pride for a day and communicating your feelings honestly."

I grin, but the reflection on the glass façade of the building I pass reflects a somber-faced man. "Like that'll ever happen."

My phone buzzes again that night after I've brushed my teeth.

Mira: Your strategy worked. We have agreed over text that I'll buy my mother a new robotic vacuum cleaner if she gets the surgery tomorrow.

Me: Told you so.

Mira: Thanks. And good night.

Me: Good night to you, too.

Mira: I'll be rooting for you to win the case competition tomorrow.

Me: I can win even without your cheering. But thanks anyway.

Mira: You just have to be a jerk, don't you?

Me: ☺

The next morning at the airport, I wind my way through the security check line. When I'm in the lounge, I text Mira to get an update on the situation over there.

Me: How do you feel?

Mira: My mother's having surgery.

Me: How do you feel?

Mira: Like I'm about to have an emotional breakdown.

Me: Maybe it's because you don't have my gorgeous face next to you to light up your day.

Mira: Maybe.

Sweat slides down my face. Lights wink on the departures display system. The boarding call for my flight will be made any minute. My presentation notes are stuffed into my pocket. I should read them once more. I changed a few bits yesterday.

But I can't.

My mind's not at all on the case competition. My heart's not here, either. It's somewhere far away, and I can't bear to kill time here when Mira's suffering.

I've never done anything crazy before. I'm a pretty rational guy. But I can't help when my body moves on its own, marching out of the airport, hailing a cab.

All I know is that I've made the stupidest decision of my life.

And nothing has ever felt so right.

TWENTY-FIVE

Mira

I've never held my breath for so long. It feels like I'll never breathe again. Minutes stick together like bits of clay. So do my palms, pasted to each other with sweat. My mother was in a good mood today so she cooperated with the hospital staff when they took her to the operating room for her surgery. The allure of a new robotic vacuum cleaner must be too much to resist.

Still, I never imagined how traumatizing it'd be to be in this position again.

Flashbacks from five years ago are juxtaposed against the present. Appa died in this hospital, too. Gone suddenly like a spring breeze in summer. I remember sitting around listlessly, counting the moments and feeling powerless to stop what I knew was going to happen. The memory is so visceral that even now it makes my eyes sting with tears.

I don't want to lose anyone else suddenly.

I know it's an overreaction. My mother's surgery is an easy one with no life-threatening complications. If I were the doctor performing it, I'd be calm and relaxed, not hyperventilating like a person about to jump off a cliff. I guess I was born to be on the other side of the operating room, where I have the power to change the outcomes for people, rather than on the waiting side, where I can only watch and worry.

When I can't bear being in my head anymore, I look at my phone, wondering if Luci's in Boston already, what he's eating, if he's rehearsing his presentation for the sixtieth time. He probably is, given how much of a perfectionist he can be.

Lucien: How is your mom?

He sent that message hours ago but I haven't answered because I don't know the answer.

I bury my head between my knees, wrapping my arms around me tightly until the scratch of soles against the ground jerks me out of my mind.

My mother's surgeon appears with a kind smile on his face. "It's over. Everything was perfect."

"Thank you." I sound breathless, close to passing out. "Thank you so much."

"We'll keep her under observation for now. You'll be able to see her later."

"Okay. Thanks."

"You might want to call your family and tell them."

"Oh, yeah. Right."

I don't have much of a 'family', but I do have an aunt. But first, I text Luci because I feel I owe it to him. He has been inquiring about my situation with alarming regularity ever since I left New York. If I didn't know him as well as I do, I might think he was worried.

Me: My mother's surgery is over. Everything went well. Things have calmed down.

Lucien: Great. How're you?

Me: I think I'm going to take a stroll outside and clear my head.

The air outside feels different from the stuffy, antiseptic-smelling, claustrophobic air inside the hospital. I drink in a lungful of it, marveling at the brightness of the sky which is so different from the artificial, harsh lights I just escaped from.

My knees, sore from being held at the same position, creak a little when I take big steps.

I scroll through my phone searching for the number of my aunt who lives in Maryland. I should call and tell her about my mother's surgery, but I'm afraid she'll take it as a sign to come over here and help me out. She thinks I'm still a kid, and can't manage anything on my own. I truly wouldn't mind her company since my mother's more tolerable when she's with her sister, but my aunt must be busy pulling triple shifts at Subway to feed her kids. Family is everything for first-generation immigrants like my mother and aunt, so she'll definitely feel obligated to take care of us in our hour of need, even though she can't afford it. I'd feel bad for asking her, but we don't have many acquaintances. There's nobody else. I have no friends, and neither does my mother.

I chew my lip, debating, before reaching into my pocket for my phone. I turn it on and scroll through the contacts list when—

“Hello, gloomy face.”

My body shudders violently at that casual tone. I end up dialing Dr. Burns's number in my awkward panic. Am I so far gone that I'm dreaming of Lucien in broad daylight when I'm wide awake? I rub my eyes. It must be all the sleepless nights, the fatigue. It's getting to me.

The scratch of shoes crackles in my ears. I whip my head around. Freeze on the details that seem all too real: the purple NYU sweatshirt, powerful thighs encased by jeans, dark hair blowing in the wind, cast in relief against the pale blue sky.

A squawk yanks free from my throat.

“Has my sexiness left you speechless again?” 3-D Lucien wears a lopsided grin. I'd be lying if I said I didn't long to lean against his solid chest, to be comforted, to have him dissolve all the stress of the past day.

“Why're you here?” I clear my throat, all strict and uptight. “The competition's today.”

“I called in sick.”

My jaw drops to the floor. “What?”

Luci’s a robot who goes to work every day. The last time he took a day off was never. It’s something he gloats about often. All part of his genius persona. Nothing can stop him from doing what he loves the most, which is surgery. And he lied and took time off from work so he could visit my mom?

The ground shifts under my feet.

Before I can fully react, Lucien thrusts a large box at me.

My eyes crawl over the lettering on the top. Get Well Soon Spa Gift Box. It’s heavy.

“For your mother,” he says. “Are visitors allowed yet?”

I stare at the box. A heavy ache, heavier than the get well soon gift that’s giving me muscle pain, pricks the back of my eyes. The lump in my throat is bigger than the size of Jupiter.

My insides are mush, my heart a jukebox whose every beat sounds like Lucien’s name. Maybe it’s because nobody has ever willingly showed up for me when I was in trouble. Except Lucien, who covered for me during my father’s death, helped me deal with the stress of residency, and took care of me when I had a migraine.

Oh my goodness. How was I so blind before? I’ve been seeing what he wanted me to see—a cold, self-absorbed genius. A rich, ruthless rival determined to tear me down. But that’s not all he is. He’s someone who cares for me. In his own way, he has always looked out for me.

“You’re quiet.” He scratches his head, his ears going red. “Maybe I shouldn’t have bought the gift. It’s the wrong one, isn’t it?”

“Why...you should be in Boston...” My brain needs to start functioning again quickly before I do something crazy like swoon over him. Or break down crying. Both would be equally embarrassing.

I doubt Luci knows what he has done or what it means. I bet he thinks buying a mini-bookstore and Michelin-star

dinners are romantic when real romance is all about caring for someone and understanding what makes them happy.

It's about small gestures that mean the world.

"You may be smart and headstrong, but you only have two hands." I almost choke because Luci's complimenting me. "And two feet and one brain and one heart."

"Thank you for that lesson in basic anatomy," I croak, the knot of emotion in my throat tightening. "You didn't have to come all the way to New Jersey to deliver this enlightening lecture, though."

"I actually came to check this hospital out," Luci says. "I'm thinking of working here in the future."

"You can't be serious." My heart flutters, too afraid to believe in this. He knows I plan to move back after the fellowship. I told him at the airport. "Your parents will have a heart attack."

Lucien surveys the hospital building, serious and businesslike. I almost trust what he just said. But I know him too well.

"I want to be somewhere we can work together," he whispers.

"You mean to compete with each other?" I rephrase. The earlier hope fizzles into nothing. "I said I won't do it."

"No, I mean cooperation. We saved Tony together. Imagine what else we could do together."

A lot. But none of what I want to collaborate with him on involves surgery of any kind. Still, he seems sincere.

"Imagine how much more miserable we could make each other," I counter. He has no idea how terrified I am of having my heart broken. This today, is already dangerously close to a real relationship. He's acting like a real boyfriend and I'm only too willing to believe in the lie and forget that all of this is fake.

"I don't deny that we drive each other crazy." His eyes are glued on me and the corners narrow with a hint of sadness.

“We seem to never tire of hurting each other. But today I didn’t come here to hurt you or insult you.”

“Do you mean that?” I ask, setting down his gift and leaning close to him.

I’m tired of denying my desires. It has only made me want Lucien more over time. I want him to like me. To love me. As a woman, as a person, not as a colleague or a friend. But right now, if all he can offer me is caring, I’ll take it.

Lucien doesn’t reply. Not in words, but the way he nods is answer enough.

I jump into his arms, burying my face in his chest and ugly crying into his soft sweatshirt-clad chest. He smells like expensive musk and a clean shower while I smell like sweat and hospital. He feels solid like a wall while my own body feels fragile like glass.

“It’s okay, baby. You’ve had a hard time.” Luci strokes my back.

My sobs become hiccups. I had no idea I was bottling up so much, and three months ago, Lucien would be the last person I’d have wanted to see me like this. Now, being in his embrace feels like the only right thing in the world.

“Erase this moment clean from your memory by the time we get back,” I murmur. “I don’t want you gloating that you saw me cry.”

“I’m not that cruel,” Lucien’s mouth ghosts over my ear.

I grab a fistful of his sweatshirt like a possessive child. “Thank you...for coming.”

“It’s the least I can do for my fake girlfriend.”

“If there was an award for best fake boyfriend, I’d definitely nominate you,” I say, the hints of a smile blooming at the corners of my mouth.

“That wouldn’t be fair to all the other nominees. They can’t win against me.”

“Maybe they can.”

“In their dreams.” Lucien laughs.

It tickles something deep within me, something that was buried by all the bad things and disasters I’ve gone through in the last few hours. I breathe deeply and then laugh for the first time in days.

When my giggles fade away, Lucien’s hand is resting on my shoulder. Reassuring. Stable. His electrifying blue gaze slams into mine, robbing me of breath.

A realization hits me with the force of a hurricane: I love Luci.

I’ve gone and fallen in love with my rival.

TWENTY-SIX

Lucien

I didn't expect Mira to talk about her father. I can tell it's a painful subject from the way she starts to cry.

"He died here...right here..." She shakes her finger at the closed door of an empty operating room. "It was the worst day of my life."

I hold her, listening to her repeat the words over and over again, until the pain seeps into my skin.

"He understood me, you know. And I understood him. It was the only good relationship in my life," she says.

Her mother has been moved into a regular room and she needs to see her, so Mira manages to wipe away her tears and eventually stalks toward the room. Only, she doesn't let go of my hand so I end up accompanying her.

The hallways are made of glass on one side and looking out, I realize the panorama of the town hasn't changed at all in the years since I was here. It's like a trip down nostalgia lane. I went to school here as a boarding student since my parents lived in New York. Richmond Academy, one of the most prestigious and selective independent schools on the East Coast. My mother went there, and therefore, so did I. Most of the other students were rich like me. Except Mira, who was a scholarship student and a day student.

I know I said I was looking for a job here, but the truth is, I can't imagine being here. In a quiet place like this. Devoid of glitter and skyscrapers and the permanent pressure of living up to the world standard. Devoid of energy and excitement and the feeling of being at the forefront of something that can change the world. But I suppose I'll find a way to adjust. Mira is really important to me right now.

Mrs. Krishnan has one eye bandaged up, but otherwise seems to be in a talkative mood.

Her gaze bounces between Mira and me. She scratches her nails against the sheets, like she's brimming with questions, but holds herself back.

"How're you feeling?" Mira asks.

"Alright. Not much different except I can't see through one eye. But..." She looks up at me from the bed she's lying in. "Am I still under anesthesia or is it really Lucien?"

Mira places my gift at her side. "It's him. And he brought this gift for you."

"How lovely." She doesn't turn, but touches the surface of the box with her fingers, caressing it multiple times to try and discern what it is. "Thank you."

"I hope you like it," I say sheepishly. Mira's mom used to work at the cafeteria in Richmond Academy where I had all my meals, so we've seen each other a lot. We've even talked to each other a few times about things other than the food menu. But today seems entirely different from all of that. I've never seen her outside the school, in her regular life.

"Mira, why're you just standing here?" Mrs. Krishnan chides. "We have a visitor. Buy him something to eat. I'm hungry, too."

I half-raise my arms, wanting to protest out of politeness that I don't need anything to eat, but to be honest, the last time I ate was yesterday night and I'd kill for a snack right now.

Mira fusses with the blankets, tucking her mother in properly before she skips out. "Okay. I'll see if they have any shops in this hospital."

I feel like an abandoned puppy. Left with a stranger. Mrs. Krishnan is peering at me through her big brown eye that is so much like her daughter's, and I fall into small talk because I don't know how else to navigate this situation.

"Um...how was the surgery?" I rub my lips.

"Fine. Nothing special."

"Great. I hope you recover soon."

"The doctor said it'll take six weeks."

"Oh." Great. I'm running out of things to say. I used to be so good at small talk. What happened to me? "Is there anything I can help you with?"

An impatient sigh comes from behind me. "Lucien, why're you here? Not that I'm not happy to see you, but don't you have to work?"

"I'm supposed to be down with the flu." I stick a finger in front of my lips. "Shhh, don't tell anyone."

"You lied to come here? Why?"

"I had no other choice. I needed a big excuse to wriggle out of an event."

Mrs. Krishnan tries to raise her head, whispering in a conspiratorial tone, "An important event?"

"Nah." I wave my hands. "But you know how people always make a big deal out of nothing."

It strikes me that I trivialized the AATS case competition. Described it as 'nothing'. Because that's how I feel about it. It's not a life-changing event to me. It probably never was. Being here for Mira is life-changing for me. I'll do just fine without the \$500 prize. In the scheme of things, it doesn't make the slightest difference to my career.

Still, I'm glad Dr. Burns and my parents aren't snooping around on this conversation. They might feel differently.

"Mira said you two don't talk to each other anymore," Mrs. Krishnan says suddenly. "That you're not friends."

My hands shoot up in a defensive gesture immediately. ““I assure you we talk to each other. But it’s true we’re not friends anymore.”

Mrs. Krishnan angles one eyebrow up on her forehead. She regards me expectantly, and I can tell I have her undivided attention as well as curiosity. Just as well. Since I planned to be honest from the beginning.

“I’ll be honest. I like your daughter. I’m serious about her.” I forget to mention romantically, but I think the message gets across.

“Oh.” Mrs. Krishnan stares at me like lightning struck her. Like she didn’t expect to ever hear those words out of my mouth. I suddenly feel like I’ve committed some grave offense. But despite the discomfort at being watched by a pair of suspicious eyes, I refuse to back down.

“I’m serious,” I reiterate. “I don’t know if things will work out, but I’m serious.”

She shrugs. “Well, you two were always so close. I knew she liked you. And I could tell you liked her, too.”

“But you don’t like me?” There’s this niggling feeling I can’t erase. She is saying all the right things but her tone of voice sounds...depressed.

Mrs. Krishnan snorts. “You’re a heart surgeon with a bright future and good personality. What’s not to like about you?”

“You don’t sound happy.”

She turns to one side, the side with the healthy eye. “I thought she’d tell me. About you. I’ve always been positive about you so why did she lie and say you didn’t talk to each other anymore?”

“Well...” I slide my hands into my pockets, not knowing where to start or how to exactly convey the zany events that have conspired. “It’s a bit complicated, actually. I know this might come as a shock, probably but we’re more like pretend-dating right now...I’m hoping it’ll be more.”

“Pretend dating.” She rolls the words on her tongue as if trying out a new, unfamiliar language. “What does that mean?”

It takes me fifteen minutes to condense it all into a version that can be digested by her. I show her the pictures on Instagram, too. For her part, she doesn’t get a heart attack at what is clearly a very ludicrous story, even though she just had a surgery and maybe this isn’t the best time to find out that Mira has been getting into trouble at work behind her back.

“So, we’ve been spending a lot of time with each other and I like her and hope she’ll like me too. Eventually,” I finish.

“She didn’t say she liked you?” Mrs. Krishnan inquires. “Not once?”

“No. In fact, she said she hates me. A lot of times.”

A sigh. “I can’t understand that girl at all.”

“Frankly, neither can I,” I agree, nodding along. “But I know you’re very important to her.”

“Then why doesn’t she tell me anything? Sometimes, I feel strangers know more about what’s happening in her life than I do.”

And, on that noble thought, we take a break and eat the cookies I supposedly bought for my fake girlfriend. We’re both just that hungry and there are no signs of Mira returning. I think we finish the entire tin in five minutes.

“Lucien,” she says my name with something that sounds like affection. “You’re a kindhearted boy.”

I rub the back of my head, feeling warmth bloom behind my eyes. “Gee, thanks, though you might be the only person to think so. Everybody always tells me that I have a big ego.”

She giggles. “True.”

“I think some amount of self-confidence is essential for one’s happiness,” I say.

“Are you happy?”

“Yes, very much so.”

“How wonderful. I hope Mira learns a thing or two from you. She’s always so depressed and gloomy. A smile doesn’t cost anything, you know.”

“She’s too hard on herself,” I agree. “She wants you to think highly of her.”

“I wanted her to grow up humble, to not have a big head, so I didn’t coddle her. If parents praise their children too much, they spoil them.”

“My parents had the opposite parenting style, you know. They kept telling me how I was special and different from other children.”

Mrs. Krishnan ponders this for a bit. Shuts her eye. Then admits quietly. “Then maybe your parents did it right since you’re happy and successful.”

She must be more tired than I thought, because by the time Mira returns, she’s already fast asleep.

I’m fully prepared to be chewed out by Dr. Burns for playing hooky at the AATS case competition when I return. I didn’t give him any warning. Only a text message claiming I’d caught a bad case of the flu an hour before the event. That excuse won’t hold up at all when he sees how healthy I am. I should’ve skipped work for at least three days, but the universe picked this unfortunate time to gift our hospital with a rash of emergency cases. Amanda threatened me on the phone last night to get my ass to work today because she and Amir cannot keep up with the workload.

The sound of his office door closing rings like a grenade in my ears. Despite being a short, middle-aged man with sagging skin, he cuts an intimidating figure in his white coat. Thick eyebrows frame hazel eyes laced with suspicion. I guess it’s

years of experience and his authority, but I feel like I'm standing in front of a police officer who is about to arrest me.

"How's your flu?" There's a deliberate pause there. I hate that I'm losing respect in Dr. Burns's eyes all the time these days, but I can't help it. It's taking a whole lot to sort out things between Mira and me as well as my own emotions. I've just got to be mature and own up to my issues.

I stick my chin out and confess. "I didn't have the flu."

"Mmmm." The program director lowers his glasses, studies me intently. "It's true you don't exhibit any symptoms. Then, are you admitting you lied to me in a text message?"

I clasp my hands behind my back. "I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking clearly."

"Your father called me so many times and all I could tell him was that you were sick. Have you cleared things up with your parents?"

It doesn't seem like a good point to mention that I always ignore my parents' calls and messages or that Dad only called me five times and he knows I won't answer unless he calls at least twenty times. Our family's pretty messed up. But I must be my parents' child because all I care about is seeming perfect to the world.

"I will soon," I answer. "And I'm sorry Dad badgered you. That wasn't very professional of him."

"He's a father. It's understandable." Dr. Burns pushes his chair backward, then rises. He advances toward me in slow, measured strides. "So what is the actual reason you failed to show at the competition?"

"Mira's mother had surgery for a throat tumor. I felt like I had to go and support my girlfriend."

"Yes." Dr. Burns nods vigorously. "She did take two weeks off. It should've occurred to me. Why didn't you say that earlier?"

"I'd planned to fly to Boston but I changed my mind at the airport." A burning, sharp sensation coats my throat. It's the

same feeling I had when I was about to board the flight, when I was torn between beating Mira by winning the competition or staying with her. “It’s new for me...being with someone. And what that means.”

Fake dating has changed me. Likely because so much of it has not been so fake. At least not for me.

I don’t want to admit how much I’ve come to care for Mira. Not to the program director. Not even to myself. Because it means I’ll lose everything when she leaves.

The conflict that has been brewing in my mind since my return makes itself known in the form of heartburn once again.

For all my assurances of moving to New Jersey to work with Mira, I don’t think I can be truly happy at a hospital like that where there’s no challenge. No cutting edge cases, no top-tier colleagues, no way to pioneer brand new surgical techniques, nothing to learn. I’ll stagnate. It’ll be a waste of my intellect. And Mira’s, too, but that’s her decision to make.

It’s a nice hospital in a nice town, sure, but it’s not...me. I know I’ll make sacrifices if I have to, to continue seeing Mira, but what if I can’t?

Dr. Burns gives me a sympathetic snort. “Well, relationships are hard. Do your best, Lucien.”

His words are delivered in an encouraging tone, but they fail to uplift my mood.

TWENTY-SEVEN

Mira

The days after Luci returns to New York are quiet and uninteresting. I spend my time cooking, cleaning, caretaking, and wondering when I'll be able to leave. I even dream of operating on a complicated cardiac tamponade case one night. But when I jerk awake at the witching hour, there's only more laundry waiting to be done.

My mother was sent home from the hospital after two days but I decided to stay and look after her for two more weeks until she has healed more, even though she'll have to keep the bandage on her eyes for longer and her stitches won't be removed until the sixth week. I'll probably come back then.

Honestly, taking care of my mother is not an easy task, since she complains about the quality of my housework all day.

"How do you perform surgery with those weak arms of yours? You can't even clean the bathroom properly. There's dirt stuck between the tiles."

"I tried," I groan, feeling more exhausted than I do after a week on-call. Looking after someone you don't get along with is brutal. My self-confidence is being worn down every day I spend in my mother's presence, but if I complain, I'll look ungrateful.

No matter what I do, how many cleaning products I use, how hard I scrub, our home looks like a scrap salvaged from a

junk sale. The wooden beams are worn down, the kitchen needed a new coat of paint five years ago, and the tiles are yellow with age.

“We should sell this place and move,” I tell my mother at the end of the first week. “Should I look for a nicer home? I’ll move back in June. Somewhere close to my new job will be convenient.”

“No,” comes her hard refusal. “I told you not to work in this town. You’ll be a nobody. They don’t even pay much here.”

“I said I’m working here,” I argue. “And they pay enough.”

Despite her bandaged-up eye, she insists on cooking. The delicious homemade meals are perhaps the best part of this entire affair but even that’s not enough to sedate my anger when my mother starts to drone on about how I need to think about my future.

At night, I fantasize about running away from it all to some tiny, remote place across the globe where I can perform surgeries in peace at some small but ill-equipped clinic in a small village.

By week two, my mother is well enough to go to work and she bolts out of the door as soon as she can. At least I’m not the only one suffering in this relationship. Sometimes, I wonder if I’ll be happy living like this after graduation. Living in the same house as my mother, dealing with housework and her fault-finding every single day. It’s not a comforting thought.

The only ray of sunshine in my life is the messages from Lucien. Luci’s busy with work (I’m certain Dr. Burns is being extra harsh because he skipped the AATS conference) but he texts me dutifully.

Good morning. I hope you and your mother are well.

Was updating my case records. Finished my one hundred and fiftieth CABG today.

I sent you a package today. It's the cookies you love to pig out on.

I'm free this weekend. Shall we meet?

I miss Luci. I miss his voice, his touch, his beautiful face, those magnetic eyes that always watch me with veiled concern. He has been so amazing through all of this. He may be the only thing keeping me sane right now.

But he's not the only thing I miss.

I miss my old life. I miss working at the hospital. I miss my colleagues. Amanda and Ruby's unique selfies. Amir's emotional calmness. Dr. Burns's steady baritone telling me what to do in the operating room. The nurses' gossip. The unique and wonderful patients like Tony I get to meet every day.

I had no idea how much of my happiness depended on my job.

At night, when I'm desperate, I call Amir to ask him how things are over there. He's not a big talker, so the call lasts all of five minutes.

Amanda's a bit better, but she's more interested in chatting about Ruby's promotion at work, their upgraded kitchen, and their Bali vacation plans than work.

"You sound different, Mira," Amanda quips. "Are you alright?"

"I'm pulling through. I'll be back soon." I exhale. The two days before I can leave feel like a mountain.

"Great. We've all been missing you." Amanda claps her hand against the phone. A loud pop registers in my ear. "Especially your fake boyfriend. I see him staring wistfully at the empty corridors outside the operating rooms and wandering around the café where you guys grab your morning coffee. He's like a ghost."

"No way. You're exaggerating." Luci would never be so obvious. He has an image to maintain.

“He’s so convincing even the nurses feel for him,” Amanda says. “Apparently, one of them overheard him telling Dr. Burns that he missed the competition because he felt it was more important to be by his girlfriend’s side when she was going through a rough time. Dr. Burns was impressed. He let him off.”

“So now he’s using me as an excuse?” I muse, slanting the phone against my ear, luxuriating in the words. Once, I couldn’t have imagined Luci saying anything so cheesy, but look what I made him do.

My heart flutters.

“Why don’t you call him?” Amanda suggests.

The mere notion kicks against my chest like a heavy boot. I grip the phone tighter.

I already called Lucien five times since he left. I don’t want him to think I’m needy. Our relationship’s on thin ice as it is. We haven’t seen each other face-to-face in a while. It’s been even longer since we had sex, when our chemistry’s the only thing holding our relationship together. I’m scared that he’ll have moved on with some other girl by the time I return. It was hard making so much progress, and now that I know I love him, I don’t want to let him go.

“I’m scared,” I whisper.

“Of what?”

“Of my feelings. Amanda, I love him. I love Lucien.”

“Woah.” A swoosh of breath. “Are you sure?”

Amanda isn’t here to stare at me with her intense eyes, which gives me the courage to admit more of my feelings.

I twirl one lock of hair, dropping a giant sigh. “I know it sounds far-fetched—”

“Have you slept with him yet?”

My eyes bug out. “Why is that important?”

“Just want to know how much I’ve missed.”

“My life isn’t a reality show.” I wipe my lips with the sleeve of my sweatshirt. “I don’t kiss and tell.”

“Okay, so it happened. Wow.” Muffled explosions of air burst into my ears.

“I’m hoping it’ll go away once we no longer have to see each other.” I massage my knuckles into my thighs. It almost feels like one of those massage rollers. “What else can I do but wait it out?”

A groan trickles into my ears. “Newsflash: there’s this thing called communication.”

“Confession? I’m supposed to be his fake girlfriend. Our contract says we can’t fall in love.”

“A contract? Seriously?” Amanda balks. “You know what, never mind. Contracts are meant to be broken, anyway.”

I stab my temples with my fingers. “This is Lucien we’re talking about.”

He’ll make fun of me. Once I open up, once I put my heart on the line, once I start to show him my real vulnerabilities, I’ll only get my heart sliced into ribbons. Luci only cares about being the best surgeon alive. The emotions of a girl like me are nothing to him. This fake-dating was his idea, and for him, it won’t cost anything.

“I think he likes you, too,” Amanda’s startling statement yanks me away from my spiraling negative thoughts. “He seems serious about wanting to impress you.”

“That’s because he’s competitive.”

“You know, Mira, you should give him more credit than that. You always think the worst of him.”

“That’s because I know him better than you.”

“No, it’s because he once broke your heart and you’ve never been able to get over it.”

“Wait, how do you know that?” It happened way back in high school and Amanda is from California. That’s on the opposite coast. “Are you a psychic?”

“You’re so obvious anybody can tell. Both of you. You resent him, but you can’t stop obsessing over him.”

It isn’t so bad, realizing that I love Luci. I thought it’d be like falling off a cliff and getting my stomach speared by sharp rocks, then drowning in the salty ocean with a massive hole in my stomach. Instead, it feels like falling off a cliff and never landing on the ground.

I don’t know what comes after this. I’m suspended in the air.

But I need to find out.

My fingers hover over Lucien’s name, itching to press it. My body’s bursting with longing. I want to call him, but we’re not in that sort of relationship where I can do that casually on a daily basis.

I hesitate, then swallow my pride and jab a finger at his caller ID when the creak of my room door opening startles me. I immediately cut the call, hurling the phone onto my childhood bed.

My mother’s visage clouds my vision. She’s petite and stocky but the shadows of evening frame her body, elongating her form until she resembles a mythical monster. I expel a huge breath, the earlier tension leaving my body now that I’ve confirmed it’s not a burglar who broke into my room.

“Here you go. This is for you.” The hammering of my pulse in my throat subsides when Mom offers me a plastic bag.

I dig inside. It contains an assortment of petit fours from my favorite patisserie on the town’s main street. I used to love eating them as a child and wanted one every time I got all As on my report card. My father indulged me every single time but my mother, being the ‘bad cop’ parent, always clicked her tongue despairingly. So this change in behavior means a lot.

“Thanks,” I mutter, plucking out a profiterole and chucking it into my mouth. It’s as creamy and sweet and delicious as I remember. “Do you want some?”

“I’m sorry for making you miss days on your fellowship but I’m glad you came.” Mom’s in work attire, a worn-out skirt suit that’s loose everywhere. She lost weight after the surgery since she couldn’t eat anything solid for two weeks.

“Yeah, it was nice to be back home.”

“I’m fine now. My colleagues at work said so, too,” my mother says.

“That’s great.”

“You can leave tomorrow,” my mother says. “There’s no need to stay until Monday.”

“Nah, it’s fine. I’ll stay a few more days.”

I fully expect her to protest, tell me to worry about my career and how bad missing so many days will look etc etc. Instead, she slides one hand into her boat-shaped black handbag, drawing out her phone. She taps the screen. I groan inwardly, expecting her prolific text-to-voice software’s voice, but all I hear is silence.

“By the way, I followed your new Instagram account.” My mother flips the phone around. Heat ravages a path through me from head to toe when I take in the images that stain the screen. Lucien and me. In Buffalo. At restaurants. Executing all kinds of silly and romantic poses. Guilt slams its heavy fist down on my chest. I never told Mom about Lucien, but with these photos, there’s no chance of playing it as a ‘close friendship’. Amanda and Amir should start their own photography business. They’re pros at making what’s fake seem real. “What’s going on?”

The cloud of sunshine I was floating on suddenly vanishes. Here I thought we could improve our relationship, but my mother just has to dig out my mistakes and rub them in my face. Every single time.

“We’re not dating,” I state bluntly. “It’s all fake.”

“What?”

“Well, there was a situation,” I tell her, scratching my knuckles. Hopelessness crawls over me. Here I thought things

were going well but looks like our relationship will be going back to normal soon. “I did it for the sake of my fellowship.”

She taps the pictures of Luci and me on vacation. My mother’s small eyes pore over the images carefully.

“This doesn’t look fake,” is her verdict at the end of it all.

“Photography can work magic these days.”

Her fingertips smudge the screen where my image is. “This is still you. You still did this.”

Her tone is quiet but accusing.

I want to die. You can’t explain fake dating to someone like my mother, whose grasp of actual dating is already weak. She got an arranged marriage, for heaven’s sake. But I’m not interested in burying one lie with another. I mean, I’m already used to disappointing my mother so one more time won’t break me.

I fix my slouching posture, and puff out my chest.

“I was trying to protect my future,” I reply.

Then I come clean. About everything, starting from how Lucien and I aren’t friends and have never been friends, to the fiasco that got Dr. Burns on our case. This part is not straightforward to convey but I do my best. Not once does any understanding flicker upon my mother’s features.

“You lied that he’s your boyfriend? To your boss? To your friends?”

“It was the only option.” I massage my sweaty knees under the table. “We were in a tight spot.”

“Was it your idea?” My mother knows about my corrosive romance reading habit. She has never approved of it but my father did, so he bought me the books and she couldn’t say anything.

I shake my head. “No, we came up with the scheme together.”

Despite everything, I do think my mother understands the importance of finishing the fellowship. While she won’t be

impressed, she'll probably appreciate the tight rope I'm walking on and accept the situation. She's a practical woman.

"You're stupid," she declares.

"Don't worry, I already know that. You've told me enough times." Nothing can soften the bitter edge of my voice. I didn't expect her to praise my problem-solving skills since the fake dating situation is excessively convoluted, but can't she see my tenacity? I'm putting myself through hell and heartbreak so I can finish my fellowship and become a surgeon. That's what she has always wanted.

My mother clicks her tongue and the sound feels like a slap against my cheek. "I can't believe you're doing this."

My fingers are balled into tight fists on my lap. I must've changed more in the last few months than I thought because suddenly, I can't quietly sit by and let her berate me. Rage bubbles through my veins and explodes like a volcano. My lips are quivering when I snap to my feet.

"What do you want me to do?" I yell at my mother. "I already did everything you asked for. I got all the As. I lost weight. I'm going to be a surgeon. Why are you never satisfied? What is it going to take to become the perfect daughter? Because I'm sick of all your demands and your constant negativity." I pause to suck in a deep breath. I have a lot left to say. "By the way, fake dating Lucien isn't even the stupidest thing I've done. I was dumb enough to sleep with a vile man who stalked me to my workplace. All because he said I had pretty eyes. I'm so desperate that I'll do anything if someone says something nice to me."

"You did what?" my mother whispers.

I'm not interested in answering questions. I'm only interested in letting out all the resentment and rage I've clutched close to my chest for decades. I think fake dating Lucien has made me see something: if you don't ask for what you deserve, you'll never get it.

"You've always hated me and I can't understand why." My voice is a knife and I'm throwing it at her face. "You pushed

me to be something I could never be. You've ruined my self-esteem and I hate you for that."

My face is hot from exertion. I wipe my cheeks. A ragged exhale shoots out of my mouth when my fingers come away wet. I'm crying. No surprise there. It was bound to happen. A huge weight has been lifted off my shoulders.

I don't regret anything as I grab my things from my room and stomp back to the living room. At the edge of my eyes, the frozen silhouette of my mother is still like a small lighthouse.

It's impossible to put a name to her expression.

"I wish Appa had never died. Then I wouldn't be so alone. I hope you enjoy being alone more than I did." I deliver my parting shot.

Then I storm out of the house.

My mother and I haven't spoken in two weeks. I realize it one morning as I'm filling out the date on a patient's chart, but I have no time to think about my family since all my attention is sucked up by the procedure.

Work is my therapy. My form of escapism.

I calmed down after I left my mother's house but I didn't want to apologize. I don't think I was unfair. I said what I felt. I was honest. And anyone who doesn't appreciate my true feelings doesn't deserve me. I'm through with giving people chances and having my hopes dashed every time. If she wants me back, she'll have to make an effort this time.

I'm sick of looking at my phone constantly, though, waiting for an apology that's never going to come, so before I go mad, I corner Lucien next to the supply closet.

I've missed having sex with him, and fear that the intimacy we were beginning to develop might fizzle out into nothing. I don't want to start over from square one. It took sixteen years to get to this point.

"What's wrong?" he asks.

I don't know what to do. I don't know what to do. The thought is a sticky loop inside my head. I still don't know the answer. I can't fix something I don't know how to fix. I'm not even certain what the problem is. My mother's attitude toward me? Her diagnosis? The messy situation with Lucien? Or the fact that I could get fired from my fellowship if I don't pretend to date someone I actually like but can never have?

"Please, Luci. I need you."

"Need me how?"

"You know how." My arms wind their way around his rock-solid shoulders. I press my lips into his chest, suckling the skin exposed by the V of his scrubs.

For a moment, I'm afraid he's about to laugh in my face, tell me it's too risky to try anything at work. If we're caught again, we won't be able to stand the embarrassment. If I was thinking clearly, I'd be able to realize the validity of all these points. But my mind hasn't been normal for the last two weeks. Ever since I realized I loved Luci and lashed out at my mother. I don't know how to handle either issue.

"Come here." The sure, safe tone of his voice swaddles me like a blanket. His body engulfs mine. He says nothing more, but the silence is charged with tenderness.

Even though this section of the hospital is deserted, anyone could pass by at any moment and see us like this. That thought sends a wave of anticipation rolling through me.

"Tell me what to do." I breathe. I think I may have figured out why I like the dom/sub fantasy so much. Because when I'm in control of my life, I only feel confused and helpless. If I let someone else take control, maybe I'll finally feel like I have my shit together.

“Stay still.” A moment later, his lips are on mine and I’ve forgotten the sadness and anxiety that were tearing my heart into pieces.

His tongue traces my lip. All other concerns flee my brain. For the first time in a long time, I’m anchored in my body rather than my head.

Heat strokes my core. My sex clenches in painful anticipation when his fingers slip under my scrubs and play over my spine. I arch into his gentle touch. This isn’t like the other times we’ve had sex. There’s nothing hard or forceful or dangerous about the way he kneels at my feet, easing down my clothes.

His tongue licks my slick, aching folds in a slow and torturous movement. That one deliberate action is enough to incite a deep shudder within my body. The sensation spreads everywhere until every cell tingles from the echo.

Heaviness weighs down my limbs. I want to let go of everything and collapse into him. My knees wobble. But his strong hands clamp around my thighs, holding them against the wall.

“I said stay still,” he asserts, without any undertone of irritation of authority.

I want to obey, but I feel unsteady. My stomach is hollow, filled with liquid heat. My eyes are sealed closed with pleasure. My tongue is stuck to the floor of my mouth.

His head between my legs...hair tickling my inner thighs...tongue teasing my nub, injecting shocks of wild ecstasy into my bloodstream...

My mind and body both surrender to the rapture of this moment. This is heaven.

“This feels so good...oh fuck...don’t stop...”

Punishingly slow, attentive, soft touches aren’t what usually turns me on. But I suppose everything turns me on when Luci’s the one doing it.

“Yes...I can't...wait...” The whimpers fade as the roar of blood in my veins reaches a fever pitch. I want to scream loud enough to paint the walls but I bite down on my hand to hold myself back, reminding myself of where I am.

A release surges through me, clamoring to break free but I don't want to come yet.

Instead, I want to float in this beautiful dream forever. To erase the real world and live in the eye of this storm.

When Lucien's tongue brushes over my raw, overstimulated clit, I go off like a firecracker. From the teetering edge, I crash straight into a deep and endless valley.

I wondered before what came after this point. But now I know.

It's release. Liberation. The shedding of burdens I've carried for so long.

I need to tell him how I feel. But the words dancing at the top of my tongue are held back by my hesitation. What if he rejects me? Should I ruin this earth-shattering with the bitter truth? Isn't it okay

But the words carve their shape against the inside of my chest like they've been pressed there with a branding iron. I have to say it. The moment is right. The need has been building inside me for a while. The need for more than a physical release. I need to emotionally release the secret that I've held close to my chest for years and protected like my firstborn. I need to surrender my heart, my first love, my years of heartbreaks and joys. Otherwise I'll never be truly free.

Also, it's not the same as when we were residents. We've been on fake dates, kissed, had sex. There's a pretty good chance Luci likes me back. He implied that night before I went to New Jersey that he liked me and wanted me to like him, too. I know words mean different things to different people but given the tender expression in his eyes, what else could he have meant by like? Then there's the fact that he missed the all-important case competition so he could comfort me. Would he do that if he didn't care for me?

I rearrange my clothes, watching him as he smooths back his hair to the tune of my heavy and anxious heartbeat. He grins at me and my resistance melts a little more. He wouldn't smile like that unless he loved me at least a little, right?

I breathe heavily, opening my mouth to deliver my confession but I only produce a stream of air. I'm still nervous.

"What?" Lucien cocks a single eyebrow upward. "Are you so speechless?"

"I'm going to tell you and I'm very serious so listen carefully."

Luci smooths wayward strands of my hair and straightens the top of my scrubs so the neckline isn't crooked on me. "I'm all ears."

The small gesture reassures me a bit. Warmth grows in my chest. I can feel it. That he likes me. Or he wouldn't do these sweet things for me.

"I love you." The words spill out on their own even though I'd planned on a more calm, rational confession. But wrapped in emotions, I've lost the ability to hold back the truth anymore.

My fake boyfriend's now standing, his fingers icy and still on my shoulder. "What?"

My mind's still hazy from the cocktail of sensations that are sedating my cells with mind numbing pleasure, so I don't immediately react to his horrified expression.

"Yeah, sorry. I know our fake dating contract forbids it. But there it is. I love you."

"You love me?"

Oh my goodness, why does he look so horrified? It's giving me acidity.

"I know it seems ridiculous, but I'm serious," I explain. "You've been so kind to me ever since we started fake dating. I used to like you before, and I buried those feelings but they've always been there. And now they've become something more."

I'm expecting a verbal response, a yes, a no, a maybe. But Lucien's expression is like a photograph frozen mid-frame. I can't detect a single muscle twitch. It's disturbing to watch. Like gazing at a statue.

"What about you? Do you love me, too?" I test the waters because I can't stand not knowing. Was Amanda right after all?

Lucien's mouth snaps shut. Then opens back up again. "No way. Really?"

His rejection slices into me like the swing of an axe, cutting off the hope I thought I had. I believed I was prepared to face whatever outcome followed my confession. I believed I was ready. I wasn't.

Because the back of my eyes hurts so bad, I'm afraid I'll go blind. Tears swim up to the surface, and when I can't manage to suppress my pain in time, they overflow.

Lucien flaps his arms in panic. I suppose like all men he can't stand waterworks. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to—"

"I don't want your pity." I hold up one hand, using the other to mop up my embarrassing display of emotion. "It's okay. I know I'm not your type. I know you were just going along with the romantic gestures because you needed someone to sleep with. It's my fault for assuming you were also falling for me."

"You're wrong—"

I don't want to hear more of his excuses or explanations of whatever else he's trying to soothe me with so he can continue what we were doing. To him, my confession is probably just an unwanted interruption to sex.

I wrap my hands around my waist. "Just forget about everything I said."

"I don't want to."

I hiccup in shock. How could he be so mean to me right now? "Don't be a dick."

"Goodness, Mira. Just stop and listen to me."

I drag my hand over my tear-streaked cheek, taking a big breath. Whatever. I have nothing more to lose by hearing his explanation for why I'm not good enough for him. I'll give him this one last chance because I'm a masochist.

"Fine," I say.

"I'm—"

A tall, curvy woman's approach nips Lucien's sentence in the bud. She looks like the type magazines usually go for—conventionally attractive with an hourglass figure, skin and hair so glossy they speak of a long association with beauty treatments, and a confident stride. The woman curves around the edge of the corridor, coming straight at me, every step a careful calculation.

She's wearing a black dress. Assuming she's a patient who got lost, I glide forward to help her. "What're you looking for?"

"I'm looking for Lucien." She cranes her neck over my shoulder. "And there he is."

She passes me and I jog after her, two steps at a time.

"Hey..." Luci's voice lacks conviction.

"You were supposed to wait for me at the entrance," the girl accuses, sliding her toned, waxed arms around Lucien. "I had to come find you myself. But you're handsome and great in bed, so I'll forgive you."

Lucien looks like someone told him he's about to die. "Um...listen..."

"What's going on?" The question explodes out of my mouth. I sound like every jilted woman in every TV soap right now. Facing the facts but refusing to acknowledge them. I used to think those women were so dumb for failing to see the obvious, but I'm worse. I've always known what kind of person Lucien was and I'm the one who swept his past behavior under the rug, believing he'd changed because of a few fake dates. Believing he'd changed because of me.

How egoistic.

“Oh, honey, don’t worry. I’m just his Tinder date,” Ms. Glossy Hair explains. “We hooked up a long time ago and he said he wouldn’t mind seeing me again today.”

My gaze sticks to Lucien. I need to know I’m wrong. I need to know what we had was worth more than that.

The apologetic expression on Luci’s face morphs into horror. He curses under his breath. My pulse whirs. This situation is three seconds away from a disaster. I should go, leave these two alone to talk, but my legs aren’t cooperating.

“You were going to…” My words evaporate, my throat closing with shock. Fuck me. I’ve been had. “Were you laughing at me when I said I loved you? Were you thinking how silly and naïve I was?”

“That’s not true.” Lucien raises his hands. Waves frantically in Glossy Hair’s direction. “She…it was months ago. I swear I didn’t even remember. I’m just as surprised as you.”

Glossy Hair clears her throat irately. I suppose no one has ever told her she’s forgettable before. Her self-worth must be low if she hasn’t slapped him and stormed out of here already.

But mine’s lower.

“Don’t worry; I’m not even surprised. This is just your regular weekday fuckup. I’ve seen it happen too many times to even care,” I say, hurt coagulating into a black, swollen mass inside my chest. Tainting all the happy memories from before—dissolving the joy I felt only days ago when Lucien came to see me after my mother’s surgery. When the world was bright and perfect and a fantasy had come true.

“I was serious about you,” Lucien replies. “I mean it.”

I hiss. I’m sick of the lies, of the false praises, of the romantic moments that make me yearn for more of what I can’t have. Love is supposed to feel secure, not like I’m standing on the edge of a fault line, waiting for an earthquake to shatter my world.

I press my hand against the wall to maintain my balance. My head’s woozy.

“You broke the rules of our contract,” I state, voice hard as lead.

“So did you,” Lucien reminds me.

“Contract?” Glossy Hair looks between the two of us with open curiosity, manicured fingers drumming against her chin. “Why do I feel like I’ve stepped on a landmine? By any chance, are you his girlfriend?”

“Yes,” Lucien replies at the same time as I reply “No.”

“Oh come on.” I seethe. “Clearly, I’m not your anything. We were fake dating, but you failed to even follow the rules for that. Was it so hard keeping your dick in your pants for a few weeks?”

Lucien inhales unevenly. “Mira, you’re being unfair. Don’t assume things about me. It’s like you’ve already written me off as a monster in your head.”

I want to believe it. I want to believe we can be together, we can be real, and that I can achieve the impossible. I want to believe that Lucien isn’t a heartless genius who has been playing my heart all this time, pretending to like me just so he can get what he wants.

But my mother’s so right. I’m foolish. Overconfident. Too naïve. I’m not good enough for anyone or anything. I mean, she hasn’t called me once in two weeks. Doesn’t she miss me? Is she happy she doesn’t have to pretend to like me anymore?

Will Luci be happy if he doesn’t have to pretend to like me anymore?

If I walk away now, I doubt Lucien will call me or beg for my forgiveness. That isn’t him. He’ll probably do fine without me. He has everything. My love was just a useless trinket to him.

Glossy Hair digs a hand into her voluminous hair, and messes it up. “Fake dating? What’s going on?”

“I was wondering the same,” a masculine voice adds.

I thought my confession being thwarted by Luci’s fuck buddy showing up was going to be the height of my

humiliation for today, but suddenly, the situation has gotten a whole lot worse.

Because the deep, even voice that uttered those last words?

It belongs to Dr. Burns.

And right now, he looks very, very pissed off.

TWENTY-EIGHT

Lucien

This is a catastrophe.

A warzone would be a friendlier place compared to this corridor. Tension hardens in the air until I can feel the uncomfortable pressure of the impending confrontation piercing me like a thousand sharp fragments of glass.

The four of us glare at each other like enemy generals on a battlefield. I suppose all of them have a reason to hate me. Tina—I think that's her name—was someone I slept with on a whim six months ago. Only she was too clingy to let go and I was burdened with work so I agreed to meet her again. And again.

I tried to distance myself from her when I realized she had grander designs on me and had slept with my father before. But she begged me for one more time so she could get closure and I felt bad for her so I randomly said “On the 14th of March.”

Obviously, I expected Tina to get the hint, find someone in our time apart and move on with life. Six months is too long to hold onto someone. I underestimated her.

The tapping of the program director's knuckles against his iPad makes my heart rate shoot up. Dr. Burns is probably dying to report this to the Director of Student Conduct. I doubt he has ever seen anything as ridiculous as two fellows fake dating each other in his decades-long career. His eyes are two

flashing amber stones, and if looks could burn, I'd be a pile of ashes right now.

Mira avoids meeting my gaze altogether, but the trembling of her tiny shoulders gives away how scared she is. We're both about to lose everything. Our fellowships, career, future....and most of all...each other.

Pain knives through my gut.

I should've reacted better to her confession, responded with something other than the disbelief of 'No way. Really?'. But it wasn't that long ago on that night that she said she didn't like me when I confessed that I liked her. But she's in love with me?

I drew back instinctively because that's what I've always done. Because yet again, I felt unworthy of those words. Like I hadn't done anything at all to deserve them. I was in complete disbelief when she said them, so overwhelmed at her confession I could barely continue standing. I never anticipated how much hearing those words would affect me. How exposed they'd make my own heart feel.

Only now, I realized that I love her, too. And I'm in the worst situation to say it. Every single person here is going to assume that my confession is a way to wriggle out of this disaster that has exploded around me. Another lie on top of this mountain of lies. Even though it's the one thing that has always been true.

"I'm sorry," Mira's voice is a frail squeak. "I'm sorry. I didn't plan to deceive anyone. I'm sorry." She apologizes over and over again until I can't listen to the excuses. I can't listen to our relationship being reduced to nothing more than a farce. It may have started out that way, but it became more.

It is more. It's love. And to call it anything else feels wrong.

"The truth was going to come out eventually," Tina interjects. "And I can't believe you'd be so desperate to date him that you'd fake a relationship."

The judgmental sneer on her lips as she chastises Mira turns my blood into a dangerous, radioactive substance. I know it's my fault Tina's here in the first place, but I can't believe I used to spend my time with people like her before.

"It's not her fault." I point to the exit. "And you should go, Tina. I hope we never see each other again after this."

Tina stomps her high-heeled foot as if planning to throw a tantrum. I hope she doesn't start with the crocodile tears, because that's what got me promising to meet her today in the first place.

But, to my relief, she scrapes the last of her dignity and arcs back, strutting down the corridor. When her form vanishes, silence winds its way around my throat like a noose. The bigger problem is right here, unsolved, staring at me with two light-colored eyes and I can't think fast enough to prevent it from colliding into my life and breaking it into pieces.

Dr. Burns crosses his arms in front of his chest, every line in his body tight, straight, and stark as a figure drawn with chalk. "You two, to my office. Now."

"You've all got it wrong," I stammer, keeping pace with the program director's punishing long steps. Mira's scrabbling behind me, wiping her tears.

One thick eyebrow skews left on Dr. Burns's forehead. "Which part, exactly?"

"I admit that we started out fake dating but it's real now." I tap my girlfriend. "Tell him, Mira."

"Real?" Mira fingers her heart-shaped earrings, looking horrified. "You just rejected me three minutes ago."

"I didn't reject you."

"That's what it sounded like."

"I was surprised. I reacted badly." Despite the dark circumstances, I grin at her. "I do love you."

"Enough, Lucien." Dr. Burns's hand clamps around my shoulder. "Lying won't work the second time. Haven't you

read the boy that cried wolf? Do it too many times and you lose trust.”

Mira’s mouth draws into a thin, angry line, like she agrees with him. The shuttering of her eyes ices the blood in my veins. It breaks my heart to see the despair that envelops her body like a winter coat. For fuck’s sake, does she really think I’m lying to her face to salvage my image and the fellowship?

Then I realize I used to be just that kind of person. One who valued winning above all else. How can I convince these people that I’ve changed? That it’s no longer my pride, my ego, my meaningless victories that matter to me, but the possibility of being with someone I love.

While I’m going round in circles in my head, thinking of some way, any way to end this nightmarish situation, to prevent it from escalating further and spiraling out of control, the click of Dr. Burns’s office door resounds in my ears.

“So if I gathered the facts correctly, you two lied about dating each other to avoid losing your fellowship for failing to act cordially?”

“That’s the gist of it,” Mira agrees, wrapping her arms around herself. “God, it sounds so stupid when you say it out loud.”

“There was no need to go so far. An explanation would have sufficed.” Dr. Burns drops into his chair and clicks on his mouse, staring at the computer screen. “Now you’ve put me in a difficult position.”

“We’ll do better,” Mira’s fingers are intertwined, in a praying position. “If you give us another chance, we’ll do better.”

“You both are not listening to me!” I scream. God, I want to grab these two bullheaded people and shake them. “I said I love you, Mira. Nothing is fake. We weren’t fighting or trying to kill each other that day, no matter what it looked like. There’s no problem here except miscommunication.”

Mira’s palm blocks my vision. “Luci, just...don’t.”

“But—”

“Based on the circumstances, I believe your failure to agree on one story is an admission of guilt,” Dr. Burns’s tone is clipped. Official. Final. “I regret to inform you two that I’ll have to report this to the Office of Student Conduct. It’s the protocol.”

“Anything but that. I’ve worked so hard for so long. I can’t afford to lose this.” Mira literally drops to her knees, hands a tight ball in her lap. Her eyes are misty. Cold fury rushes through me. I’ve never felt so powerless, so utterly defeated.

“It’s all just a huge hassle for nothing.”

“It’s not the end of the world.” Dr. Burns wheels back his chair. “Your case will be heard by a three-person panel, composed of a faculty member, an administrator, and a student. You can convince them of your innocence.”

“But what if I can’t persuade them?” I grab a fistful of my hair. I’d like to very much tear it out of my head, but I don’t have the strength.. I’m so tired of all this. “Seeing how I can’t convince either of you of my feelings, it’s not a farfetched scenario.”

I feel like I’m talking to two stone walls. Nothing I say makes a dent in Mira or Dr. Burns’s brains. Mira’s convinced I’m the villain who was screwing other women behind her back. But I’m not my father. I witnessed first-hand the heartbreak his actions caused my mother. I’d never do the same to someone.

Mira knows about my parents. Is she thinking the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree?

Dr. Burns taps his soft jaw with a pen. His irises scroll the length of the page he’s reading on his computer. “Based on what you’ve done, the punishment won’t be anything severe. You only got into one fight. You’ll likely be let off with a written warning and allowed to finish your fellowships and graduate.”

“Are you sure?” Mira climbs to her feet, her expression painted with hope.

“I’m saying there’s no point to any of this. We didn’t do anything wrong except lie about dating each other. That’s not a crime,” I reiterate, and am once again shot down by two identical hisses that erupt in unison.

“If you’re going to keep repeating the same argument, then you may leave.” Dr. Burns gestures to the door. “Both of you; I have nothing more to say and I need to finish writing my report to the university.”

“Can you not reconsider?” Mira pleads. Her puppy eyes could melt steel but apparently, Dr. Burns is made of stronger stuff.

He digs his thumbs into his temples, relaxing back against his chair. Even so, his shoulders stay taut. “An important part of becoming a doctor is learning to accept one’s mistakes and growing from them. Avoiding responsibility is just irresponsible.”

I hold back a snort at the obvious line.

A hiccup.

“I’m sorry.” Mira reverts back to her apologies.

“Let it go.” Dr. Burns snaps his fingers. “Just focus on what you can do now. Our patients are still counting on you.”

“Of course.” I say.

Amidst all the drama, I entirely forgot about the procedures I have lined up for the rest of the day. People’s lives must be saved, regardless of the state of my personal life or academic standing. Bringing all my attention back to work helps calm my frayed emotional state. At least there’s something I can control. Something I’m good at. Something I understand.

Mira appears haggard as she mumbles, “I will do my best.”

I want to stay and fight, but I’m guessing it won’t do any good. Maybe when we’re finally out of here and he’s typing the email, it’ll dawn on Dr. Burns how ridiculous this entire situation is.

I mean, in the first place, he accused us of doing something we never did, which made us panic and lie about dating each other. Now he finds out we were lying and feels blindsided. If he'd listened to us properly the first time around, none of this would have happened.

I can't hate him too much, though, because if none of this had happened, Mira and I wouldn't have fallen in love with each other.

The moment we're out of the room, Mira blasts away in the direction opposite me. Frustration stings my nerves. Must she always be so difficult? Her body, back to me, looks so lonely and isolated in the gray corridor that threatens to engulf her. She doesn't turn back or give any indication that she has plans of doing so.

Panic cuts through all my other thoughts and emotions like a blade.

I can't let her slink away now or she'll never return to me. This is my last chance. My only chance. It all rides on what I do now.

I seize Mira's hand. "I need to talk to you."

She swivels with an audible gasp. Her fingers slip away from me like wet seaweed. "Just leave me alone, Luci. I need to think. I can't see you right now."

Tears fill her eyes. Her nose is scrunched from the effort of preventing them from dripping down her face. Her cheeks, red and dry and her hands, balled tightly enough for her nails to cut the flesh of her palm. She's volatile, tearful, and on the verge of breaking. If I push too hard now, she might cry.

"Okay. I won't push it." I back away from her. It has been a tough day. I know she'll see sense once she thinks this over. But there's still something that needs to be said. "But I need you to know I love you. Doubt anything but not that."

I understand it was the wrong thing to say the moment I see the openness in her eyes flicker out, leaving only ashes and a mean twist to her mouth. Her expression cools, becomes detached.

But I've already dug my grave, so nothing's stopping me from lying in it.

"I've loved you for a long time," I continue. "When you said you wanted to be my friend in high school, I was angry because I loved you. I didn't want to be your friend. I wanted to be more than friends. I wanted to be your boyfriend and I was mad that you couldn't see it."

"Why didn't you say so, then?"

"I didn't want you to feel pressured to go out with me because you pitied my unrequited feelings. You'd already made it clear you only saw me as a friend."

Also, my pride wouldn't allow me to look like a loser in front of the girl I liked. I doubt any sixteen-year-old has the kind of self-confidence required to pull off a maneuver of that caliber in the face of inevitable rejection and humiliation.

Secrets, regrets, confessions, all cards I've held close to my chest exit my body at once in streams of words. "I've followed you to every college you went to because I didn't want to be separated from you. I never imagined we'd have the chance to become actual lovers." I pause, because I've run out of breath and I sound like a winded hippo. "I want you to know that our time together meant everything to me. It was all I ever wished for."

"I enjoyed our fake dates, too, for whatever it's worth" Mira admits with a coarse laugh, but her inner conflict must still be raging because she doesn't give me an inch. The stubborn curve of her jaw remains fixed. "However, I won't be swayed by your pretty words. I can no longer trust you. I'll decide on my own what I want to be and who I want to be with."

"I've never lied to you and never will," I whisper. "I can promise you that whether you decide to be with me or not."

Mira doesn't nod. She twists her body, silently marching down the rest of the hallway until she's no longer in my vision or part of my world.

TWENTY-NINE

Mira

The last time I saw Lucien's face still haunts me. It was only this afternoon, but it could've been another lifetime. I rub my fingertips against the fleshy part of my palm, hands tucked into my pockets as I race down the sidewalk, throwing myself into the act of sprinting, with gusto.

A dense heaviness that can't be attributed to the winter weather hangs in the air. Snowflakes buffet my face, driven by a forceful wind. A harsh, frigid wind cuts through my puffer jacket, striking me straight in the chest.

It's a stupid idea to walk home when it's snowing but I need to clear my mind and a walk outside will keep me from escaping into a Netflix show or drowning my heartbreak in tubs of ice cream.

Everything ended so quickly. I mean, I knew we couldn't keep up our farce forever, but I had hoped it would end better. I had hoped he would love me.

Why did I think he'd change? How stupid of me to romanticize a player. This isn't a romance novel. Love can't change or redeem anybody in the real world.

My heart wrenches violently as if rebelling against my frustration.

Our time together meant everything to me. It was all I ever wished for.

Chills traverse the length of my spine as those words echo in my head. Were they a lie, too? Or was everything the truth? Does Luci really love me? I used to know him so well. I used to be able to decode the intention behind every twist of his mouth and raise of his eyebrows, but he has changed. We both have changed.

I don't know what anything means anymore.

Heat cocoons me, chasing away the numbness of my hands when I finally get inside my apartment building. I zip up to the elevator. A flash of movement sizzles across my vision before the doors seal shut.

My eyes stick to the other occupant who entered the elevator.

“Mom?” I gasp.

My mother looks like she did two weeks ago, except even thinner in skinny jeans that are no longer skin-tight. One eye's still bandaged up but that doesn't seem to affect her movements at all. Guilt coats my throat. Shit, I was horrible to her and this is all my fault. What if she's not well again? What if...I catch myself before my knee jerk reaction gets too far. No. I must stand my ground. This is why my life is full of people who take my love for granted. I can't take responsibility for everybody's lives.

“Mira. Are you busy?” My mother's usually authoritative voice wavers. She's carrying a big bag that I'm certain is packed with food. The pungent smell of garlic and spices saturates the air. I've been sleepwalking since I discovered Lucien's betrayal but my stomach growls at the delicious scent, anchoring me in my body again.

“Why're you here?” I snap.

“Well, you haven't called.”

“I told you. I don't want to talk to you.”

This is the worst moment for my mother to decide to see me again. My confidence is already shattered. I don't need her criticism to make it worse.

Why do all my enemies have to pop out of the woodwork today? I huddle in one corner of the elevator, trying to draw stability and safety from the solid metal that presses against the back of my legs. I've been shaken to my core. My love, my reputation, my fake boyfriend, my job...I don't know if I'll have anything tomorrow. My precious life has been ripped away from me.

"Are you still angry?" My mother's question spears through my fog of worry.

I stretch my hands in front of my chest. "Yes. I've also had a terrible day at work. So unless you're here to apologize, you should leave."

"I wanted to see your apartment," my mother says suddenly. "I realized I never saw the apartment you moved into. I've also brought you a housewarming gift."

"Now?" It's been almost two years since I moved into this place. She never showed any interest in visiting before. "Why now?"

A shrug of her petite shoulders. "Better late than never, I thought."

For some reason, even though I should've learned my lesson by now, the phrase gives me hope. *Better late than never*. Is this the lead-up to something more?

More heartbreak, likely, my inner voice supplies.

Luci broke my heart already and I'm not in the mood for another tiring confrontation, but it's not like I can tell my mother to disappear after she came all this way.

I will my fingers to cooperate, while I try to unlock my door.. My eyes keep getting blurred by tears and I enter the code wrong three times, prompting my mother to click her tongue and ask, "Do you even remember the code?"

"I'd be grateful if I could forget everything today," I whine, but finally manage to get the code right. It feels like a triumph when the door opens. Small things start to mean everything when you've lost the big ones.

My mother follows me inside and scampers over to the window. Turning back, she surveys the entire space and scrunches her lips into a frown. “This is a room, not an apartment, Mira.”

“Yeah, it’s a studio. Welcome to Manhattan.”

“You pay a lot for this, though.”

“That’s right. Two thousand dollars. Was the cheapest I could find.”

My mother puts the food she’s carrying on the non-existent counter space of my kitchenette. “I’ll warm this up.”

“I’m going to take a shower. You’re staying over tonight, right?” It’s already 6 pm.

“If you want me to.” She’s really walking on eggshells since our last confrontation, but still, I’m disappointed. Because she still hasn’t apologized to me. Or said a single word about our argument. Well, what’s one more disappointment for my already broken heart?

“It’s okay,” I say, irrational anger balling up in my throat. “It’s only one night.”

Nothing’s going my way today. At least I can cry in the shower all alone where there’s no one to judge me. I strip out of my clothes and climb into the shower. The moment the spray hits my face, it carries my tears all the way to the drain. I hiccup, then quickly slap a hand over my mouth. If I’m too loud, my mother might hear. I can’t even cry in peace in my own house. I sink down into my bathtub. Knees against wet porcelain. Throat feeling like a pincushion stabbed by a hundred tiny needles. Wrapping my arms around myself.

All that has happened flashes past my eyes.

No way.

I didn’t reject you.

I was surprised. I reacted badly.

That keeps echoing in my head as hot water beats down on me. I’ve turned the temperature up high, so each droplet that

contacts my skin burns.

Steam fogs up the mirror. It begins to trickle out from under the door. My mother must be wondering what is taking me so long.. But I need this time alone. I need time to process, to let the feelings bleed out, to reach the calm center of my soul once again.

Because my life will go on, no matter who stays or who leaves. My life will go on even if no one loves me. I'll pick myself up and be a success. I'm not a pathetic person.

I'm strong.

Even if I'm currently sobbing my guts out and don't have the energy to get to my feet.

I've never lied to you and never will.

Part of me is clinging to that so much it's unhealthy. I'm so confused. I have no idea what I should believe. Thinking feels like a monstrous effort and I know I'll start overthinking anyway.

Why does it feel like everybody ends up betraying me? I drag my pruned fingertips over my cheek, wiping away the trail of tears. When I finish drying my hair and exit the bathroom, there's food on the table. My mother managed to find my only two plates and put them on the table.

My lost appetite miraculously returns after the sob session in the shower. And being faced with hot, delicious food isn't the worst thing in the world.

I serve myself rice, then pick at the grains slowly because it seems like a good way to distract myself.

A metal object screeches as my mother pushes it across the table's surface. "For you."

"This is the housewarming gift?" It's a silver Indian lamp. We've had that at our house forever, beside the television. It's part of my mother's wedding gifts that she brought over from India. My grandmother bought it for her.

"It's very nice," my mother praises herself. How did I never acquire her self-confidence? "Everybody in my village

was very jealous of me. ”

“I mean, it’s valuable...are you sure?”

“It was going to be yours eventually,” my mother says. As I’m her only daughter, in keeping with traditions, all her wedding gifts and jewelry will be passed down to me. They are family heirlooms, after all.

“Thanks,” I mumble.

We both dig into dinner then. There’s a lot of food. Way too much for two people. It almost looks like she cooked for... three. Oh god, don’t tell me—

“How many people did you think you were feeding?” I ask, because I know my mother responds to straightforward questions the best.

“Three,” she replies.

“You thought I lived with Lucien,”

“No, I thought you saw him every day.”

“I don’t. In fact, I distinctly remember telling you were pretending to date. You even said I was stupid.” No matter how much I try, I can’t release the tension bunched up in my shoulders. My butt is glued to the seat, heavy like a stone. The memory of being treated like an imbecile and Lucien’s name on my lips is everything I didn’t need right now.

“But I thought you loved him.”

“What?”

“He told me he was serious about you.”

“What?” I hear myself murmur, as I spit out the food I’m eating, coughing relentlessly until I find a glass of water and drain it. “When did he say that?”

“When he came to see me after the surgery. He was the one who showed me Instagram.”

“That fool.” I fight to keep the irritation out of my voice. He was the reason behind everything. How did I never wonder why my mother suddenly was on Instagram? I just assumed it

was a family thing. That one of my uncles or aunts had made her do it. I understand that Lucien has no idea how my mother's psychology works, but the moment he said 'serious' she probably already put him down as her future son-in-law and started picking out our future honeymoon destination.

"You love him, don't you?" my mother says, half a fried okra hanging out of her mouth.

I sigh. "I don't hate him."

"You spend a lot of time with him."

"We work together."

"So you don't like him."

"I do. The problem is; he doesn't like me back." I wipe my sweaty palms against my pajamas. "That's the reason we've never had a real relationship. I told you our relationship was fake. We did it for our career."

My mother's eyebrows cross. "But how would a pretend relationship help?"

"Forget it. There's really nothing to talk about." I let my fork clatter to my plate, then pick it up again and lazily scrape circles around the mound of rice on my plate. "Besides, I'm not dating Lucien. Also, Dr. Burns figured out that we were lying. So it's all over now."

"Over," my mother echoes dumbly. "But you were friends for so long."

"First, we were never friends, only rivals. Second, I don't want to talk about this so let's just eat dinner and go to sleep." I lift my gaze carefully, stopping short of looking my mother in the eye. I'm not ready for the disappointment of what I'll see there. "Unless you're going to apologize to me? I'm really not in the mood for small talk tonight."

"Okay. I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"I'm not sure...for not understanding why you were dating Lucien?"

I groan in frustration. “I think I prefer silence to your excuses.”

“Do you really hate me? I thought you were just angry because you had to take care of me for so long and couldn’t go to work, so you snapped under the stress. I thought you’d cool down. But then you didn’t call me for weeks and I worried you meant what you said.”

“I’ve hated you for years,” I reply, far too serenely for the subject of the conversation. “You’ve always treated me like I was a disappointment. You always tell me I’m foolish, stupid, an idiot. That really hurts my confidence.”

“I’ve never implied that you lacked intelligence. If I believed that, why would I have encouraged you to become a doctor? It’s not easy getting into medical school.”

“Yet you always say I’m not worthy of being a doctor. My arms are weak, I’m too emotional, I have no drive, no ambition.”

“I was just nagging because I felt like I had to push you to be better. It’s what all parents do. I didn’t think you were so sensitive.”

“Well, newsflash.” I slam my fists on the table. “I’m a pretty sensitive kid who soaks up other people’s feelings easily.”

My mother gives a tiny nod. “Your father used to say that, too. That you were emotional and I should be careful. But you didn’t complain or rebel much as a kid and I thought that was because you weren’t affected by anything at school.”

I run a hand through my hair, the food tasting like ash in my mouth. “I thought you’d criticize me even more if I complained about how difficult the tests were and how stressful being a surgeon was. You didn’t seem interested in my problems. Not like Appa was.”

“I am interested in your problems and your life. But you never talk about anything.”

“Because you never try to understand me! If I tell you something, you’ll just tell me it’s my fault for being too stupid

or too naïve or too unambitious. And I don't want to hear that. I need praise and affirmation. It's already hard being a surgeon. It was terrifying during residency and it's still terrifying now, knowing someone might die because I was spacing out. I want to know I'll be loved even if I mess up. Other people don't have to get straight As or get into cardiothoracic surgery fellowship to be liked by their mothers. I want to be like other people, too." I'm breathless by the time I've finished that monologue, my fists bunched up around my pajama bottoms.

"Mira listen to me," my mother says. "I want you to work hard and achieve a lot but it doesn't mean I'll hate you if you don't. Compared to what I was able to accomplish in my life, you've already done a lot."

The warmth behind my eyes moves all the way down to my chest, spreading. This may be the most validating thing my mother has ever said to me, and I'm so desperate right now that I'll take it.

"Well, sometimes that's exactly how it seems to me," I say. "Like you hate me but just tolerate me because I'm your only daughter."

"I don't hate you. And I'm glad you're my daughter. You're humble, hard working, and kind-hearted. You even nursed me back to health after my surgery. I'm grateful for that." A tremulous smile plays at the corners of my mother's lips. It surprises me since I've rarely seen her smile. It makes me feel like I've done something...big. Monumental.

"Guess there's at least one thing you like about me, then." I snort. "I never thought I'd hear this in my life."

Her eyes fill with a potent mixture of sadness and frustration. "I don't know why you think so negatively of me, but I don't berate you as much as you imagine. I've always been proud of you. I always tell our relatives that I'm so glad my kid grew up emotionally stable and law-abiding."

"Then why don't you tell me that?"

"I'm telling you that now."

“You should tell me more often.” I wipe my nose. “I like to hear such things. It makes me happy.”

“Okay, then I will.” My mother looks at her plate, which she has wiped clean, and then back at me, wearing a sheepish expression. “And I’m sorry for coming unannounced.”

“No, it’s okay. I think this apology is the best thing that happened to me today.” I actually mean it. I’d have cried myself to sleep on an empty stomach if not for my mother’s visit. At least now I feel a bit more positive. Knowing there’s one person in the world who likes me. That one person has my back during this difficult time.

My relationship with my mother has always been fraught. On one hand, I’m dependent on her because she’s my only family but our bonds were stretched thin by the fact that we couldn’t really communicate with each other.

But I realize it wasn’t just miscommunication. It was also my pride, my own stubborn belief in my own inferiority.

Nobody told me I was an idiot. Nobody told me I wasn’t worthy of love.

I always believed those things on my own. I used every action as proof to justify my own beliefs. My mother and Lucien and everybody else were pawns in my battle to justify my own inferiority complex. I resented them for validating my beliefs, even while I desperately sought their validation.

“Being an adult is difficult.” To my everlasting surprise, my mother comes around and puts a hand around my shoulder. “It’s all about duties and responsibilities and realizing that time has passed and you’re no longer who you thought you were. That you can no longer do the things that defined you. I have felt that of late. That I’m no longer as strong as I used to be. I have to depend on you a lot more from this point on. But I don’t want to become a burden to you.”

“You’re not a burden.” I hold her hand. It’s not the first time, but it feels different from all the times before. Her cool, damp skin is comforting. “I do want to take care of you in any way I can.”

“I know. But you still don’t have to move in with me after graduation. I want to continue being independent for as long as I can.”

“Okay. I understand. I’ll look for a job somewhere else. Distance makes the heart grow fonder and all.”

Suddenly, I feel like I’ve been freed from an invisible bond. The indefinable darkness that always coiled around us seems to have vanished. I know it’s not all over, but I feel I can tell her things honestly from this point onward. Because she said she’s interested in hearing about my life and my problems.

Not only that, I think I’m glad I don’t have to move back to my hometown. Living in the big city for so long has made it feel like home. I’d be bored in a small place, visiting the same spots every weekend.

“So what’s this problem at work you mentioned earlier?” my mother inquires as I begin nibbling on onion bhajis.

“It’s an epic disaster.” My lip wobbles with the weight of the tears I’m holding back. I really want to talk to someone, to let all my frustrations out, to be comforted.

Her voice is quiet but steady as she asks, “Did you...kill someone?”

“What?” My body flinches. “You think I’m a murderer?”

“Not like that.” My mother begins to shake her head vehemently under my irritated stare. Her hands are flapping at her sides. “I meant by accident. Like you couldn’t save a patient.”

“That’s not what happened.”

“Then what happened?”

“It’s twisted....” There’s nothing stopping me from revisiting the dumpster fire that was this afternoon. My mother listens attentively, making no sounds. But the strangest thing happens when I revisit it...it all appears completely different. The entire narrative.

If I trace it back to the source, the woman showing up out of the blue did seem a little odd at the time, too. I know Luci's a player but he's a genius, too. He'd never risk getting caught at his workplace and being outed for our lie by giving out details of his occupation. Which means she found it herself and...stalked him? Like Tom?

Which means he wasn't lying when he said my confession overwhelmed him and he likes me. He even said he loved me. While Dr. Burns was listening.

Lucien Stone, who has forever persisted in the image of the cold, super genius, looked like a romantic idiot in front of our boss for me.

"Are you sure he was lying?" my mother asks now. "I mean, his love life sounds complicated, so I don't blame you for giving up on him."

"No." The word floats on a heavy breath. "I'm not sure at all. Wait. Let me check."

I make a beeline for my handbag on the couch and pluck out my phone. As the light flashes on the screen, I pray I'm right. Even if it'd mean I was the worst fake girlfriend ever.

As expected, there's an entire novel written by Lucien waiting in my messages. I scan the contents, the lump in my throat widening into the size of a football by the time I reach the end.

I love you.

I love you.

I love you.

The repetition makes it more effective. But what I'm interested in is that he has attached screenshots of his message exchanges with Tina over many months and days. It reminds me of our ABSITE results and how we used to do the same then to convince each other. It's all overkill. Then again, he knows me well. I never believe anything without proof.

The proof staring at me makes me reconsider everything. True, Luci could've made up all these text messages, but if he

did, that's already a sign he's serious. I've never seen Luci make an effort for any woman. No matter how good the sex, no matter how sexy they were, he always looked disinterested. Always went for the ones who were easy and no trouble.

He never put his pride on the line. Never pushed hard enough to appear desperate or needy. Hard enough to convince me he was serious.

Just like I didn't.

But something changed, because he sounds very desperate in these messages. I don't believe he'd go so far for just sex with me. Objectively speaking, I have limited sexual experience and mostly let him dominate me in bed, which doesn't make me a very active partner. There isn't much merit to having a sexual partner like me, all things considered. And that's not just my inferiority complex speaking because I definitely know Lucien wasn't into the whole dom/sub thing before he met me. He seemed unfamiliar with it.

I hear my mother moving behind me. The floorboards creak when she walks.

"I think I may have misjudged him," I say. "Again."

"Again?"

"What would you think if someone was nice to you? If they brought you lunch and tried to get you to rest when you were overworking and looked out for you when you were overexerting yourself?"

My mother scratches her head. "That they cared for me? They liked me?"

"It seems like common sense, but I always assumed it was because he was looking down on me, telling me I wasn't capable of doing things on my own. Just like you."

I never imagined he actually cared for me. The me who had nothing to give him except love. Our last encounter spills down my mind like a waterfall.

His broken, vulnerable expression as he confessed what has to have cost his pride: "I've loved you for a long time."

I thought it was a lie.

Only, the truth is so fantastical I have a hard time believing.

Lucien loved me for sixteen years? And yet, we put each other through the wringer, lashing out because we thought we'd been hurt.

"I can't believe I was so blind," I cry now.

"I've told you so many times. You need to calm down and think clearly. You act from fear and make everything worse," my mother says.

I crumple my body into a ball, as if to physically protect myself, but the sting of truth cuts deep. All my problems in life are caused by me. Because I act when I'm scared. Because I pull back the moment I see there's a possibility of getting hurt. Because I'd rather ruin my own life than have someone else ruin it.

Swiftly, I unfold my body from the couch and reach for my laptop. With newfound determination driving my body, I start Googling Ella Stone-Anderson. I'm a woman on a mission. This is my last hope. My last chance of making things right.

I realize now that it was all my fault. I shunned love at every turn because I was blinded by pride. I've lived my life guided by biases, nurturing imagined wounds and shutting people out of my life if they slighted me once. I didn't listen to Luci's explanation even though he told me he loved me. I doubted him and thought the worst of him every single time he did something nice because I was scared of being wrong about him. Because I was scared he might actually turn out to be a nice, decent person, and that would mean I judged him unfairly as a heartless, thoughtless, lying playboy. Somewhere deep within me, I hated the idea of me being wrong about anything. I wanted to be right more than I wanted to be happy. Because being wrong means that I'm stupid. And I never wanted to feel stupid again.

But in my convoluted attempts to avoid feeling stupid, I've become miserable. I've pushed away happiness and love and

everything real. And at the end of it, I still feel empty and worthless and not at all smart.

I'm the one who got my pride hurt at sixteen and started this stupid competition between us. That's why, I'm the one who must end this.

And in true Mira fashion, I'll do it with the biggest romantic gesture ever.

THIRTY

Lucien

“What is this deliciousness?” I ask, my voice muffled by the food packed into my mouth, also medically known as the oral cavity. I’m on my third serving of this dessert which looks like a brownie but tastes like a mixture of crack and fairy dust. My fingers can’t grab the next bite fast enough.

Ella, my bookish cousin, shakes her head at me. She’s leaning against the wall, trying to disappear between the lilac and white flowers. She even planned her camouflage by picking a gown of the same color.

“It’s a Brookie, Lucien. A hybrid between a brownie and a cookie.” Ella unfolds her hands from the rigid defensive stance in front of her chest. “And you must be stressed if you’re eating so much of it.”

“I’m not stressed. I’m simply celebrating Uncle Henry’s birthday,” I say defensively. My blood swirls, rising up to my head, throbbing there like a small, live animal. I didn’t want to be reminded of what I was trying to forget, but now, thanks to Ella, my mind’s back to being a beehive of regrets and anger.

It’s a nuisance when everyone in your family knows your stress-relieving rituals. I’m not one bit ashamed of drowning my anxieties in sugar, but it’s the questions that bother me.

Shifting my weight to my left leg, I gaze out at the large space in front of me. The room at Ritz-Carlton Central Park is packed with guests. All the big-name celebrities here, A-list actors and Grammy-winning singers. It's not really my world. Still, I'm grateful for the chance to be here, to disappear among the guests, none of whom will bother to talk to me because none of them know who I am.

"I hate crowded parties like these, but Mom insists on doing grand things for Dad every now and then," Ella complains. "I say it's excessive."

"I think Uncle Henry is having a great time." He's at the center of the room, seated around the table with Max and my parents. My parents, who, as usual, are sour-faced, in contrast to Henry and Max whose hands are interlinked on the table. They're both sipping a glass of champagne each, making eyes at each other. "He looks so happy."

"Dad has a secret love for luxury and indulgence; don't tell anyone," Ella flips the pages on her phone's Kindle reader. "But I'm so tired of it. The dressing up and preening in front of people. It gets old quickly."

The room's submerged in violet-hued light, which makes the glassware glitter like diamonds. The light's muted, so it's a little hard to catch people's exact faces unless they have the light from their phone screen spotlighting them like a criminal.

A message beeps. I hurriedly reach for my phone, which still has no replies from Mira, before realizing it was Ella who received a message, not me. Thanks to the bright white light from her phone, it's impossible to ignore the touch of red that blooms on her cheeks as she reads the words.

Oh?

I crane my head to read it, too, but she swipes the message away from the screen as if scalded. "What...what are you doing?"

"Trying to read what made you so embarrassed all of a sudden."

“It’s nothing...” Trailing off, Ella pans the room with her eyes until it fixates on a tall figure in a tuxedo and red bowtie. Only his side profile is visible. The chiseled cut of his jaw and nose make him look like an old aristocrat. His eyes are dark and intense when he nails Ella with a single, disgruntled look across the vast party hall. She chokes.

“What’s with that reaction?” I nudge an eyebrow upward. “You know him?”

Ella’s suddenly super interested in the book she was reading again. “We take some of the same courses at university,” she mumbles.

“Why’re you texting him on a weekend? Is something going on?”

Ella looks like someone just asked her to shoot herself in the head with a gun. “I’m...not...texting him!”

“Seemed like you were.”

“It wasn’t him. I was texting...someone else.” A pause. I spy her irises darting left and right, hear her mind whirring for an excuse. “My professor. I need extra help on some courses. That’s all.”

“Hmmm.” The sound reverberates in my chest. “Why did Max invite him, then? He looks pretty young.”

Ella rolls her shoulders down with a defeated sigh. “His father’s a bigshot. Owns a bunch of diamond stores. Mom and he are involved in some charities together. Is that explanation enough, Lucien? Or would you like to interrogate me further?”

I brush my palm against my face. “I get the sense you’re hiding something.”

“You’re not my dad. Or my mom.”

“I’m just worried about you. Ella, if something’s happening, won’t you tell me?”

“Nothing’s happening.”

“Well, that certainly doesn’t seem to be the case. Even at the restaurant that day—”

My voice withers as my peripheral vision fills with the figure of a woman in a navy shift dress somewhere behind Mysterious Aristocrat Classmate. The jump of my pulse sends a stream of blood whooshing up my neck. The dress is the same one Mira bought at Saks Fifth Avenue weeks ago. What are the chances?

But...could it be....

No way. Mira wouldn't come, not after all that went down at the hospital on Tuesday. She hasn't even been to work since that day. Nor has she answered any of my messages or calls. I don't want to give up, but unless I can contact her, how am I supposed to patch things up?

Just like on Tuesday, the urge to catch her before she slips away, to make her listen to me, resurfaces again. But before I can get close to Navy Dress Woman, she melts into the crowd, leaving me with unanswered questions.

"Now what about you? Who was *that*?" Ella narrows her eyes cheekily. "Oh pray tell if you're hiding something."

"I'm not sure." I wipe my lips, which have gone dry. "I think I'm gonna go find out."

It'll torment me forever, the woman in the navy dress, unless I make sure with my own eyes that she isn't who I think she is. But right as I burrow my way through the crowd, Ella's hand snags around my jacket. She pulls me back.

"Wait. Look." I follow the direction of Ella's pointed finger.

The woman in the shift dress walks up to the center of the room, right to the table with the spotlight where Max hands her a microphone. Navy Dress turns, the dress swishing around her knees, and her face is no longer a mystery, no longer a figment of my imagination mounted upon the canvas of reality.

Her beautiful, big black eyes are straight out of my tortured nightmares. My fingertips burn with the memory of stroking her tawny skin, clearer than spring water and smoother than velvet.

Mira? What's she doing here?

For minutes, as she holds the mic without saying a word, my heart whips up a storm in my chest, racing with anticipation and fear.

Then she finds me in the crowd. Her eyes lock onto mine. Never before have I felt so vulnerable, so exposed. What the hell is she planning to do? Broadcast my supposed infidelity to the world? No, Max would never allow me to be embarrassed like that in front of so many people.

Mira's lids fall shut, then open back again.

Air feels like stones in my chest, every breath a labor.

I look away, not ready for whatever's next.

"See? Told you I wasn't texting him." Ella's disembodied voice floats like a ghost over my body where every muscle is curled with tension. "I was texting your girlfriend. Was looking at her, too."

"You were what now?" I ask.

"Oh, Lucien, you have no idea what's coming." She abandons her reading, inching closer to me and slapping me on the back. "You're going to remember this forever."

I brace myself, don't know for what, as sound bursts through the speakers. It isn't the 'Happy birthday' song I'm expecting. Uncle Henry and Max are grinning ear-to-ear while my parents look utterly confused. Much like me.

My gaze draws up very slowly, shakily, skimming past colorful dresses to reach her.

"Hello, everyone, my name is Mira." A riot of emotions explodes in my stomach as the first sounds leave those lush, beautiful lips painted a deep oak, weaving into the air before spearing me straight in the gut. "Please don't let me disturb your evening. Feel free to ignore me. I'm only here to deliver a specific message to one Lucien Stone."

A strangled noise explodes out of my mouth when those words, uttered in a familiar feminine voice, reach my ears.

“Luci, I’m here to apologize to you. I know I should’ve done it earlier, but I had to find the right words and I wanted to do it in the most extra way possible. I’m a die-hard romantic after all.” Her nervous laughter ripples through the microphone. “So here I am now. Standing in front of all these famous people who must think I’m off-kilter, apologizing to you for everything. I mean...there’s a lot to cover. Starting at sixteen, for not realizing you liked me, for getting us tangled up in a twisted competition because you hurt my pride by refusing to be my friend. I’m sorry for everything that happened during medical school and residency, for being at your throat and hating you because you were smarter than me. I’m sorry for being mean to you every time you tried to help me because I couldn’t swallow my pride and admit my failures. Trust me, I’m not even halfway through my list of things I need to apologize for. So I’ll continue—I’m sorry for roping you into a hare-brained fake-dating scheme, falling in love with you for real, then failing to trust you. Because, honestly, I never imagined after sixteen years of pining for you that you would ever truly love me back. You’ve always been this mythical standard for me. I wanted to be you. I wanted to be with you. I wanted to beat you. But most of all, I wanted to be someone who could be worthy of your love. As you must’ve realized in our long association, I’m petty, proud, competitive, cowardly. I cover for my inferiority complex with aggression, and hurt the people I love the most. But I’m better when I’m around you. I was able to see a new version of myself these last few weeks while we were together. And as much as I fell in love with you, I fell in love with this better version of me. The me who had standards, the me who is kind, romantic, affectionate, generous, and secure. The me who can be vulnerable enough to fall in love.”

Her monologue winds down. She draws a shaky inhale, and there’s an invisible but very tangible weight to the silence in between. My throat burns as I lean forward, scrambling through the parted crowd to get closer to her. “Finally, I’m really sorry for last Tuesday. I didn’t give you a chance to explain your side of the story. I mistrusted you because you were you. I assumed the worst about you because I was convinced I was right about you being an asshole. I’ve never

been more wrong in my life. I know you weren't playing me. I was just looking for an excuse to push you away again. The truth is, I love you. Always have. And looks like I always will." Mira looks around. "So, that's all the things I'm sorry for. Please find it in your heart to forgive me, Luci. It's okay if it's not immediately. I can wait. But don't give up on us. Not now that we've finally managed to admit the truth to each other. Oh, and happy birthday to you Henry. I'm sorry for ruining your lovely evening but I hope my gift makes up for some of that."

With an embarrassed sigh, Mira hands the microphone back to Max who pats her back encouragingly. Henry shakes her hand, saying something to her that I can't hear. I'm out of breath racing across the room.

The split second of silence after the end doesn't last long. The crowd erupts into a loud cheer. Cameras go off. I guess some people were recording the whole thing. The noise washes over me until I feel I'm part of a movie set, the purple lights, smoke, and glass part of a world that's a fantasy. Nothing seems real anymore.

"Mira!" I yell, my feet carrying me to her.

The awed whispers of the people around us cut out, leaving the room as quiet as an underwater cavern. Mira glides toward me.

We stand face-to-face, our shared heartbeats echoing in the silence.

"How?" I ask at last, when the unreality of the situation loses its grip on me. "How did you manage to do this?"

"Ella helped me." Teary eyes, dark and deep. "I remembered you said she was studying at NYU. Turns out she's the president of the literature club so I sent her an email, asking her to help me and she responded. We met up and well...that's how I'm here."

"This is...totally crazy. Over the top. Did you have to go through all this trouble? I'd have been happy to receive a text."

“I had to do it so I could show you—and me—how serious I was about becoming a better person,” she replies. “I’m sorry, Lucien. I really am. I put you through so much for sixteen years.”

“It’s alright.” A trembling breath leaves my lungs. I draw her into my arms. “I was an idiot, too, for never coming out and saying what I felt.”

“I love you.” The words rumble against my chest.

“Yeah, I heard,” I whisper.

“And I admit you’re better than me.”

“Heard that, too. But you know it’s not true. I wouldn’t be with someone who wasn’t as smart as me. Just wouldn’t work out.”

“You’re such an egomaniac.”

“Yes. But you love it, don’t you?”

“Can’t say I hate it.”

She brings herself to her tiptoes, until her lips brush against mine. I cradle the back of her head, my mouth meeting hers with equal fervor.

A dozen rich and famous people are watching us and so are my parents, but in this magical moment, all I can feel is the love of the one person I’ve missed more than anything.

The rest of the weekend is a long romantic interlude, filled with cozy domesticity, meals out at fancy restaurants and deep conversations about our pasts. It whooshes past me like a bullet to the brain. On Monday, it’s back to work. Which means a return to the dark, depressing reality of being called by the disciplinary committee any time. Mira and I go to the

hospital together, holding hands, hoping it'll lessen the anxiety of facing what we know is coming.

“Are my eyes deceiving me?” Amanda bounds over like an eager beaver the moment she spies us in the hospital. “Or are you two actually holding hands?”

“They are,” Amir, never one to be too far from the scene of action, confirms. “And you can trust me. I have perfect vision.”

“So did you finally make up after your big fight? Or is this phase two of your fake dating plan? Because if I'm being honest, I'm tired of all the pretending.”

“We're not fake dating anymore.” Mira replies.

I slide an arm around her shoulders, squishing the side of my face against hers. “We are together, officially..”

“Woah.” Amanda claps a hand over her open mouth and gives Amir a sidelong glance. She quickly snaps a pic of us on her phone. Another no-makeup couple selfie to add to her photo bank. I don't know why I feel indescribably proud of being ‘couple-selfie’ approved by Amanda. Probably because she's the one who knows the most about love out of all the people I know. “I knew this was going to happen but I'm still shocked.”

“I'm happy.” Amir claps. “I was getting tired of the negative atmosphere at work. Everyone's been so quiet. We missed you, Mira. And I hate to say it, but I even missed your banter with Lucien.”

“So did I.” My heart flutters away from me when my girlfriend gives me a flirty look. I already felt like the luckiest man alive when she made herself vulnerable to ridicule and apologized to me in front of an audience of the world's most famous stars, but this small, honest look feels just as precious.

We're going to make a lot of precious memories together from this point, but I take a mental snapshot of her face because I don't want to forget a single piece of our story.

I refuse to let go of her after that. We walk down the hallway in each other's arms, like a lovesick couple. This feels

more dramatic than when we were pretending but I'm so close to bursting with joy, I don't care.

"Are you practicing for a walk down the aisle?" Our stroll prompts the nurses and staff to murmur at us.

"Not anytime soon," Mira murmurs, so quietly only I can hear. "We have to become the number one surgeons first. Actually, I don't care if we never get married. We can keep being Lucien and Mira and see where that takes us."

"Sounds about right," I agree. "Marriage isn't anywhere on my priority list, either. But being with you is."

A ferocious groan emanates from Mira. "You'll turn my head with talk like that."

"We're officially together!" I scream at the top of my voice to all who can hear. It's so childish. The me from two months ago would've balked at the thought of expressing my care and affection for someone so openly. But I'm a changed man. Thanks to one very special woman and an incredible chain of events that conspired to bring us together.

Who knows? I might even start believing in fate next.

"Finally, now they learn," Clara replies as we stride past her. "You owe us all for putting up with your shenanigans all this time. Last week was like walking in a warzone."

"Yeah, I never heard of 'fake dating' before this," Sumeet, another nurse, taps on his ID card.

An anesthesiologist shushes us. "There are patients here. I get, you want to announce your togetherness to the world but watch your volume."

I raise my hand. "Sorry."

Tap. Tap. Cold footsteps, beating out a specific rhythm. Before I can turn, a bellow cuts through the sterile air of the hallway.

"What's with this ruckus early in the morning?" My glee is momentarily drained by the emergence of the program director's voice. Dr. Burns's intimidating figure eats up all the light, leaving me feeling like I'm in a dark tunnel again.

Not now. I can't cower here. I straighten my shoulders.

"We made up over the weekend," I blurt out quickly. "For real, this time."

"He's not lying," Mira affirms, her fingers closing around mine in a gesture of solidarity and comfort. "And he wasn't lying before, either."

Dr. Burns fingers his glasses, pushing them up on his nose. He scrutinizes us, face vacant of any emotions. "Did you, now? And just in time, too. I'd like to have a word with you both, if you don't mind. In my office."

Mira and I jerk in unison at this surprising request, but comply.

"Is this about the student disciplinary committee?" I ask, when the quiet begins to creep under my collar, disconcertingly.

Dr. Burns moves his head side to side slowly. "I decided against informing them."

"Really?" Mira's gasp of relief could probably be heard on Mars. "I mean...thank you. I'm so grateful."

Something softens in the program director's face. A smile tugs at the corners of his lips.

"Don't be Dr. - Honestly, I felt silly writing the email to University Life. Two of my students were fake dating because of me and then broke up. What should I do? It's not even a real issue." Dr. Burns releases a long-suffering sigh, palm falling on the armrest of his chair. "I was probably hurt because you lied to me. But I can see that the lie has benefited you, so I'm willing to forgive you this once."

"Thanks." My breath is so loud; it drowns half my words. "I'll not disappoint you again. I really, really mean it this time."

"I'm going to remember you two," Dr. Burns says. "As the fellows who gave me the most headaches and also an almost cardiac arrest by making out in the fellow room."

"But also as the most dedicated, right?" I venture.

A poke in my left rib. “Don’t toot your own horn, Luci.”

“Well, you’re both one of a kind, that’s for sure.” Dr. Burns curves his finger toward the door. “Go now. Work hard. And in the interest of our patients’ psychological state, please don’t roam around the corridors with your tongues in each other’s mouths.”

“What?” I cry. “When did we do that?”

“Thought I’d make myself clear just in case you were planning to.” His eyes narrow slyly. “I can never tell what’s going to happen next with you two. It’s like rolling the dice.”

Mira beats me to the door. Brown eyes pin me with an intense look when we’re outside the office. I close it carefully behind me as I follow her, taking two steps at a time to catch up.

“What?” I ask.

“Nothing.” Mira turns her head up, studying the ceiling. “Seems like we’re destined to be the couple who can’t keep their hands off each other.”

“Got a problem with that?” I caress her nose, thumb flicking the tip.

Her mouth lifts in a grin. “None at all, Luci. None at all.”

EPILOGUE

1 year later

Mira

Sunshine feels warmer when you're happy. So do mornings. I've begun to realize that. I wake up in a beautiful, cozy room in downtown Los Angeles, feeling warm in more ways than one. Luci's face fills my vision. It's such a surreal sight, that I momentarily wonder if I'm still dreaming. He's already awake, his gaze hyper-focused on me when I yawn and smack one arm into his shoulder. Unperturbed, he watches me like I'm a heart he's operating on. Full attention. Not even a blink.

His blue eyes reflect the bright sunlight invading the room through the curtains. The weather's so different here in California. I'm still getting used to the sunshine, the heat, wearing flip-flops all year round, and the other little adjustments I've had to make.

"I love you," Lucien whispers, his thumb creating a trail of shivers across my cheek.

Heat climbs up my face. I'm already naked under the covers, which means my willpower is that much lower.

I'm still getting used to the fact that I live with Lucien and that means we're always close to each other. We work at the same hospital, too, and pretty much spend all our free time

together, being mushy, making up for the decades we lost because of our pride.

Yeah, all our colleagues think we're over the top.

But I don't care.

Love is all that matters now. I fought so hard for this impossible love. We lived in the shadow of pride and lies and closeted emotions for so long. I've already frittered away years holding myself back. I won't waste a single opportunity to show my feelings now.

Snuggling closer, I try to fold Luci's body into the circle of my arms, but he's too big. Burying my head into his chest, I whimper. "Good morning."

"You once told me seeing me ruined your mornings." Lucien chuckles, gliding his palm down the back of my head.

"Not anymore," I say. "Now you make my day."

Since we finished our fellowships, it has been a wild ride. I decided not to move back with my mother. I still need to learn and grow as a surgeon and I can only do that in a place that challenges me. It's too early to start taking it easy. Not when I have my #1 competitor so close to me. When Luci and I got job offers from a great hospital in San Francisco that's pioneering new advances in non-invasive procedures, there was nothing to think about. We packed our bags and moved as soon as the fellowship ended and we passed our boards.

My mother was pretty stoked with the developments, too. It was her wish come true. Now that I understand her, I realize she knew me better than I knew myself. I would never have been happy confined to a small place, bickering with her day and night.

Work here is hectic and demanding, but also fun. The best part is I get to do it all with Luci.

My quiet, cozy morning bliss is interrupted by the shrill tweet from my phone. I grab it immediately to check if it's

some emergency..

“Your mother?” Lucien inquires.

I groan. His prediction’s right on the money. A deep sigh filters out of my mouth as I scan through yet another Whatsapp message with an attachment of the article detailing the difficult pediatric transplant surgery I performed at work last week. It has been covered in the news extensively, likely due to the fact that the kid’s father is a billionaire from Dubai and a royal or something.

I text back smiley faces and drop my phone on the nightstand. “Honestly, I regret telling her to praise me. Now she boasts about me to all our relatives on the family Whatsapp group. They’re tired of hearing about my achievements.”

A smooth smile slides across Luci’s mouth. “Isn’t that what you wanted?”

“I guess so.”

“But don’t forget to share the credit. You didn’t do it all alone.”

True. The surgery was performed by a group of experts—which coincidentally included my boyfriend.

“Yeah.” I nod. “We make a pretty good team.”

Luci’s fingers skim my throat, and I forget to breathe. “In every way.”

“Yeah.” My voice turns into a desperate whine when pleasure seeps into my bones. “In every way.”

Our lips melt into each other’s. Sweet birdsong trickles in from outside. Sunlight paints a warm spot on my back. It’s like a Disney movie—perfect and utterly fantastic. But the moment Lucien removes his lips from mine, old fears rear their head. This is all so new, what if it disappears?

“Don’t be afraid,” Luci reads the hesitation in my expression. He squeezes my shoulder reassuringly. “It’s real, Mira. I love you for real. The fake stuff’s over.”

“I love you, too,” I reply, chasing away the negative thoughts and old wounds from my head.

Because guess what?

This is just the beginning of the love story of Lucien and I.

AFTERWORD

Thank you so much for reading this book. If you liked it, I'd be thrilled if you could leave a review or rate the book on retailer websites. Reviews help out authors a lot!

Please check out my other books as well. There's a chance you may like them, too.

To keep up to date with my new releases, sales, free ebook promotions and the like, subscribe to my [newsletter](#).

You can also follow me on [Instagram](#)

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ALSO BY SASHA CLINTON

Henry & Me

Author Sasha Clinton returns with a hilarious new rom-com about what happens when an inept, out-of-work actress is forced to work for the guy she brutally rejected in college...

My name is Maxima Anderson and there are three things I regret in life: being mean to Henry Stone, moving to Hollywood for my acting career, and choosing to become Henry's housekeeper. The third's the worst, though, because I suck at housework. I'm pretty sure Henry hired me because he knows this, too, and wants to see me make a fool of myself while he savors my misery.

Did I mention he's a millionaire and he's paying me a ridiculous amount of money to do a bad job at housekeeping?

But things aren't going according to his plan. Or mine. Because I'm beginning to realize that under his stony façade, Henry has a golden heart. And he's gotten so much cuter since college. Our chemistry sizzles hotter than my burnt pancakes, and his sweet words corrode my resistances faster than bleach corrodes the limescale in his bathtub. And if I don't do something about it, I might end up falling for the guy I hurt once...and hurt him again.

Henry & Me is an uplifting, laugh-out-loud romcom perfect for fans of Sophie Kinsella, Jennifer Crusie, and Sally Thorne.

You're Still the One

Debut author Sasha Clinton weaves a raw, powerful tale of ambition, forgiveness, and overcoming the past when it won't let you go...

It has been seven years since Ashley Brown had her heart broken. Once a struggling, unemployed girl looking to make it big in New York City, she has finally found her dream job as an editor after her divorce. Working for one of the biggest nonfiction publishers, she lives the kind of successful, glamorous life most women can only dream of.

When she's assigned to work on a new book by a celebrity entrepreneur, Ashley is overjoyed. Until she meets the author. Andrew Smith isn't just a successful billionaire writing his autobiography...he's her ex-husband.

Haunted by the wounds of their short-lived marriage, working with Andrew isn't only going to be painful, it may just break her all over again.

Deeply moving and emotionally charged, You're Still the One is an account of two people's growth as they come to terms with the beauty and unpredictability of love.

Perfect for fans of Sally Rooney, Cecelia Ahern, Jojo Moyes, and Colleen Hoover.

In My Arms Tonight

Author Sasha Clinton returns with a raw, emotional story about two ambitious people who have spent too long hiding from their feelings...

Kat Cullen. She's independent, childfree, feminist, successful, and doesn't trust anyone. Ever.

Alex Summers. He's a charming, ambitious orphan who doesn't let his guard down. Ever.

Their upbringing and past wounds have led them both to feel guilty about their desire to find love. But when these two strangers collide under stressful circumstances, the tender feelings they've kept locked away behind their perfect facades begin to bleed out.

With each other, they can find solace, comfort, and happiness. But can two people who've spent all their lives hiding behind a mask open their hearts to something genuine?

At once poignant and gritty, *In My Arms Tonight* is a searing portrayal of overcoming fear and emotionally healing the scars of a bad childhood.

Perfect for fans of Helen Hoang, Colleen Hoover, and Abby Jimenez.

Love me Like You Do

A chance meeting with a producer opens up a world of new possibilities for thirty-something Bella Hopkins in this charming romantic comedy from Sasha Clinton that's perfect for fans of Abby Jimenez, Talia Hibbert, and Beth O'Leary.

Bella Hopkins wants to buy a house so she can have the security she never did growing up. But why is real estate in New York so damn expensive? Burned out from house hunting, she meets charming movie producer Jamie Star who offers her a crazy proposition: \$100k if she agrees to appear on his new Netflix show.

Bella doesn't know the first thing about showbiz, but she'll do anything if it means she can buy her home. It's not like she'll ever fall in love with a player like Jamie, anyway. She learned her lesson after living with a mother who hopped from one unreliable boyfriend to another. But Jamie's cocky wit, sexy charm, and genuine kindness are getting under her skin, and Bella might end up making the same mistake of falling for him.

Love Me Like You Do is a delightful, laugh-out-loud romantic comedy that also includes the love story of Jamie's father, Grant, a rich but lonely Hollywood star, and Eve, a razor-sharp employee at his studio who might be the one who makes him realize what he needs.