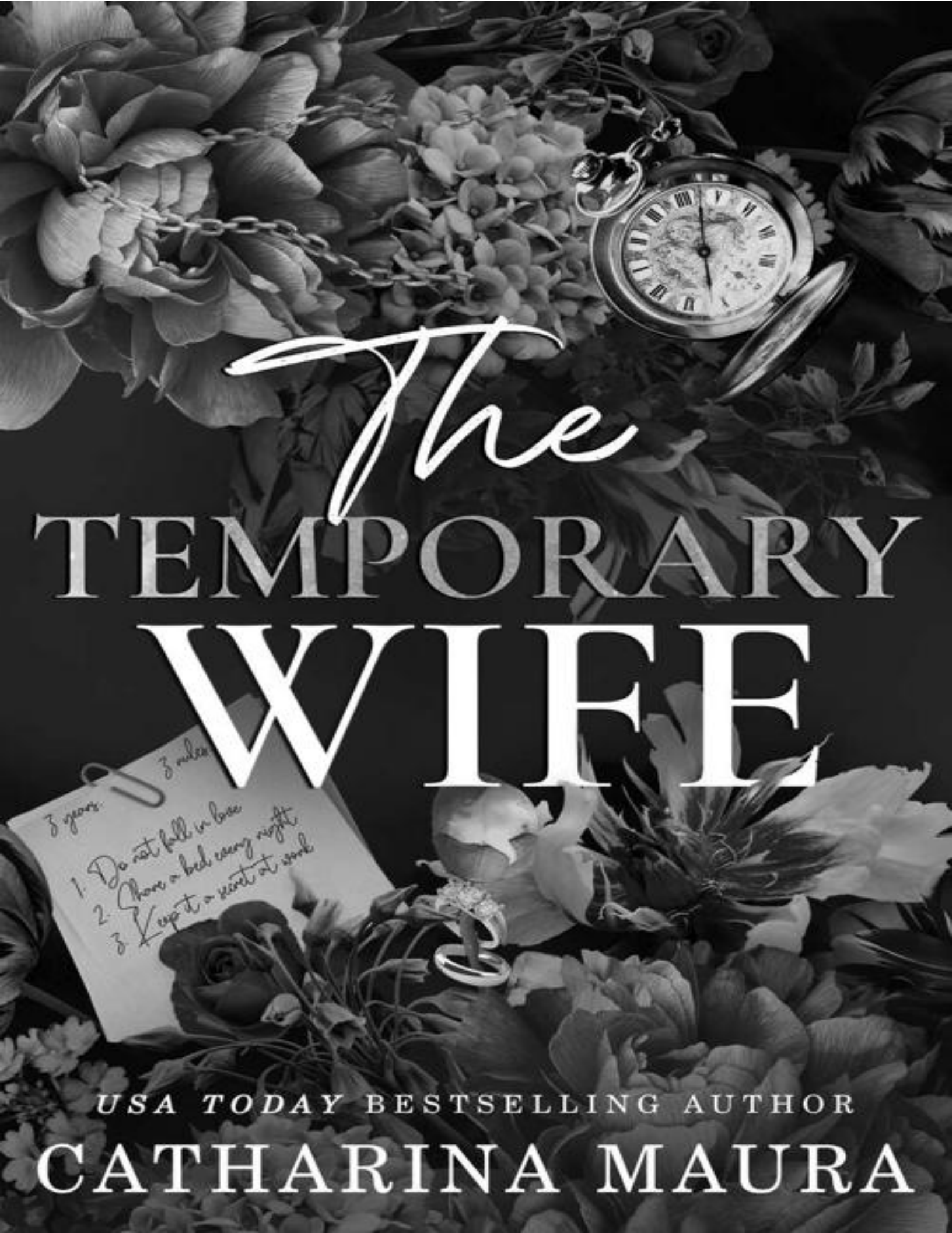

The
TEMPORARY
WIFE
3 years
3 rules
1. Do not fall in love
2. Share a bed every night
3. Keep it a secret at work
USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
CATHARINA MAURA

The Temporary Wife

THE WINDSORS

BOOK TWO

CATHARINA MAURA

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This one is for those of us that fight to break the cycles we're trapped in.
Just because it's all you've ever known doesn't mean it's right.

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Chapter One

LUCA

There's a bead of sweat forming on the forehead of the man sitting in front of me, despite the chilly temperature in my office. I should put him out of his misery, but instead, I continue to stare him down.

"I… the fund… we… we're so grateful for your continued investment," he stammers.

As he should be. Between my family and all of our clients, we've got billions invested throughout the world, a far from insignificant portion of it in his firm.

"I never said I'd continue investing in you." My voice is firm, devoid of any kindness despite my best attempts to insert some.

He starts to tap his foot, and I watch as that bead of sweat runs down his face, his breathing accelerating by the second.

“A-are you not satisfied by our performance? Our share price increased by twenty percent this year.”

My executive secretary, Valentina, walks in right at that moment, her timing as perfect as it always is. I’ve had my office checked numerous times to ensure that she does not, in fact, have a listening device in here. My security team even triple checked that our phone system doesn’t allow her to listen in either. I don’t know how she does it, but she’s always there before I even have a chance to ask for her.

I look up at her and take in the stoic expression on her beautiful face. They call her *The Ice Queen* behind her back, and it’s not hard to see why. Despite her obvious beauty, she’s cold as ice. I’ve witnessed her orchestrate the downfall of more than one famous company, and she does it without an ounce of compassion. She’s as devoid of emotion as I am, and I wouldn’t have it any other way.

Valentina places a folder in front of Jackson Smithson and smiles politely as she moves to stand beside my desk. I’ve always hated that smile of hers. There’s nothing overtly wrong with it, and it doesn’t exactly look fake, but it still rubs me the wrong way.

She looks into my eyes for a moment before placing a copy in front of me, too. My gaze drops to the pink sticky note on top of the stack of documents, and I grimace. It simply reads *R&D.* There’s no further context, but then again, when it’s her, that’s all I really need.

I glance up at her in mild irritation. She knows I hate the color pink, and I’m certain all of her stationery is pink just to spite me. It is, no doubt, her way of paying me back for the torment I’ve put her through in the last couple of years.

Valentina has gotten on my nerves from the second my grandmother appointed her as my personal assistant eight years ago. I’ve done all I can to get rid of her, but she’s always a step ahead of me. We’ve been locked in an endless war, and no matter what I do, I’m always on the losing end.

I tip my head toward the document on my desk. “Your share price increased by twenty percent, but your company’s profit tanked this year. Care to explain?”

Jackson’s chest expands as he breathes in deeply, almost as though he’s bracing himself for the verbal battle we’re about to engage in. How perfectly adorable.

“That would be because we chose to invest heavily into research and development this year. We’re creating some products that will revolutionize the finance industry as you know it.”

I smile at him. “The *whole* industry? Really?” That’s the best he could do? If nothing else, he should’ve chosen an emerging investment vehicle that falls outside of my area of expertise.

He nods vehemently, the gaze that is meant to look reassuring reeking of desperation instead. Valentina’s gorgeous warm hazel eyes meet mine, and she smiles yet again, irritating me even further as she places another sheet of paper in front of Jackson. It never made sense to me that a woman as cold as she is was blessed with such beautiful warm eyes.

“The R&D figures in your annual report were lower than they were last year,” she says, her voice soft and sweet, and oh so fucking deceptive. “I’m not sure I understand,” she adds hesitantly.

He turns to her like she’s a fucking lifeline, not knowing she’s a shark in her own right. Poor guy. I wonder if he’ll drown in his own shit before she shreds him to pieces.

“Oh, that’s because the R&D isn’t on this year’s report,” he says, his eyes wide with panic. “But it will be in our upcoming quarterly report.”

Valentina’s eyes widen innocently, and I bite back a smile. “But… if that’s the case, then how come the upcoming R&D investment isn’t in your retained earnings in this report? How are you funding your research?”

I turn toward Valentina and nod thoughtfully. “I wonder,” I murmur. “Do you have any theories, Valentina?”

She nods and looks into my eyes. “I’m no expert, but I’m somewhat worried that there is no money to invest in the R&D he’s speaking of — not unless we invest it in him. The inflated share price is caused by their dimwit of a CEO who continues to make outlandish social media statements in an obvious attempt at market manipulation. There’s no substance, and there *will* be a market correction when they fail to follow through on their infeasible theories.”

She’s a vicious fucking beast wrapped in the sexiest body I’ve ever laid eyes on. I lean back in my seat as I enjoy the show. I might despise Valentina, but she’s my right hand for a reason.

“M-my son, he’s a visionary,” Jackson says. “One of very few. He’s an industry disrupter, a genius. Sure, his claims can be outlandish, but you won’t regret investing in him.”

I stare him down and sigh. “Your son is a dreamer. He’s not after profit, Jackson. He wants to change the world, and it’s a noble pursuit, but it isn’t one I’ll fund. I’m not a fucking charity.”

More sweat gathers on his forehead, and for one single second, something akin to pity washes over me. Thankfully, it’s fleeting. “I gave you a chance to explain yourself, but instead, you spun a web of lies. He needs to step down as CEO, and you need to appoint someone who can actually make your company profitable again. You have three days to make a decision before I pull my entire investment.”

His face pales. “Luca, if you do that, we… we’d go bankrupt.”

I cross my arms and nod slowly. “Then I suppose you’d better think long and hard about your legacy.”

I rise to my feet, and he reluctantly rises too, his gaze pleading. “Three days,” I remind him as I see him out. He nods in resignation as he walks away, visibly in torment.

The door falls closed behind him, and Valentina looks up at me with raised brows, her eyes overflowing with contempt. She acts perfectly professional in front of others, but when it’s just the two of us, she makes a fucking mockery of me. I’m not entirely sure why I let her.

“Three days?” she repeats. “You’re a monster. He’s going to agonize over this decision for three whole days when you could’ve just called an emergency board meeting to replace that kid yourself. You are, after all, the largest shareholder. Instead, you made him come here and *tortured* him.”

I smile at her. “I’m not the one who called his son a dimwit and messed with him like he’s fucking prey. Besides, he built that company from the ground up. It’s up to him to decide whether or not he’ll let his son ruin it. Three days is enough time for him to find a different investor. If he truly believes in his son’s vision, then that’s exactly what he’ll do.”

The edges of her lips tug up, and she shakes her head as she gathers the documents on my desk before straightening them. Eight years, and I still can’t truly read her.

I tear my eyes off her and glance at my father’s old pocket watch instead. “My grandmother is expecting both of us for our weekly family dinner tonight. You know she doesn’t like to be kept waiting. We’ll attend together, and we’ll finish our work afterward.”

Valentina nods, not even a hint of protest in her eyes. For years, she’s worked the same sixteen-hour days I have. Initially, I only made her work

these insane hours in an effort to make her quit, but it’s become our usual routine.

She follows me to my car quietly. Ever since she was hired, I’ve tried to unravel the relationship between my grandmother and her, and I never could. Not even Silas Sinclair, our brilliant Head of Security, could figure out their connection. I have no idea why my grandmother appointed a young college drop-out as my assistant eight years ago, or why Valentina continues to be invited to events that are meant strictly for family. There’s something about Valentina Diaz that I thoroughly dislike, and it isn’t just the mystery she’s wrapped in.

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Chapter Two

LUCA

"Have some more, Val," Grandma calls over the noise at our packed dinner table, showering her with the same love she's always given me and my five siblings. Grams throws me a stern look, and I grit my teeth as I reluctantly add more glazed carrots to my secretary's plate.

I can't figure out why Grandma favors Valentina so much. Our weekly dinners are strictly a family affair. There are only two exceptions to this rule: Raven, my sister's best friend, and *Valentina*.

Now, I'd understand if Valentina was invited every once in a while, a few years into our working relationship — but that wasn't the case. She's been invited to family dinner once a month, like clockwork, from the moment we started working together. She claims not to know why my grandmother treats her so well, but I call bullshit.

I've been trying to find out if my grandmother pays her to report on my every move, but I've found no paper trail evidencing that. But then again, I never would. My grandmother would never slip up in that way.

Valentina smiles at Grandma, and I stare at her in wonder. Why is it that she never behaves this way in my presence? It isn't just the genuine laughter escaping her red lips — it's the easygoing conversations she holds with my brothers, and the inside jokes she has with my sister, Sierra.

Valentina, Sierra, and Raven giggle about something I can't even begin to comprehend, and I tear my gaze away, focusing on my food instead.

Valentina is on great terms with every single member of my family, except for me, the man that actually pays her an exorbitant salary. I can't tell which version of her is real. When she's around my family, she's so fucking sweet that even I almost fall for her act. If only they could see her at work. That illusion she's trapped them in would shatter instantly.

I take a sip of my wine, my eyes settling on my older brother, Ares. At this loud table, he and I are the only ones who are quiet tonight. I follow his gaze to find him staring at Raven. She's laughing at something Valentina said, and he can't seem to tear his eyes off her.

I look away, trying my best to hide the hint of concern I'm feeling. Raven isn't just our sister's best friend. She's also Ares's fiancée's younger sister. She's the last woman he should be looking at that way. I shake my head and empty my wine glass. An arranged marriage is what awaits all of us siblings, but at least I'll go into mine without feelings for someone I'll never have.

"You're quiet," Valentina says as dinner wraps up. "Is everything okay? Is there something urgent we need to work on?"

I look up at her in surprise and shake my head as I lead her through the main house where my grandmother lives, toward my own condo. "Do you ever think about anything but work?"

She smiles at me in that way I despise. "Do *you*?"

The edges of my lips turn up. "Touché."

Valentina presses her thumb to the scanner at my front door, and it swings open. She exhales softly as she slips out of her high heels, leaving them by the door as she heads to my living room barefoot.

Without her heels on, she looks so fucking tiny. It'd be so easy to pick her up and push her against the wall. Would her lips taste as venomous as the words that escape it?

I run a hand through my hair and shake my head. What the fuck am I even thinking? Valentina is beautiful beyond compare, but I have no doubt she'd be just as cold and unpleasant in bed. If I tried fucking her, I'd walk away with frostbite, no doubt. I shudder, annoyed with myself for even thinking about it.

"Interesting," she says, staring at her phone as she sits down on the sofa. I take a seat and lean in to look over her shoulder, a whiff of her signature lavender scent involuntarily making me breathe in deeper. "He asked his son to step down. I'm surprised."

She turns to look at me, her face so close that her nose nearly brushes against mine. My eyes drop to her perfectly full lips, an unwelcome hint of desire rushing through my body. "Why?" I whisper. She doesn't move away, and neither do I.

"Why, what?" Her voice trembles.

"Why are you surprised?"

She blinks and moves back, that irritating professional mask of hers slipping back into place. Valentina Diaz, one of very few women I know who has never once wanted me. I suppose that is why we're still working together after so many years — because we've never crossed any boundaries. That's how I always wanted it to be, yet somehow, her indifference irritates me tonight.

"I didn't think he'd ask his son to step down as CEO, but even more so, I'm surprised you gave him a chance to save his company at all. In all the years we've worked together, you have never once given anyone a second chance. You've always been decisive and ruthless. What was different this time?"

She stares at me pointedly. I wonder if she realizes that no one but her would ever dare demand an explanation from me — and no one but her would receive one.

I hesitate for a moment and reach for my pocket watch absentmindedly, my fingers brushing over the Windsor crest engraved on it. "Jackson was friends with my father. The decision to invest in his company was my dad's." Speaking about my parents hurts less than it used to, but even though it's been over twenty years, the pain is still there. I suppose it'll never truly fade. Some wounds never heal. This is one of them.

Valentina looks down, shielding her expression from me. "I see," she says, her tone devoid of emotion. For a split second, I worried she'd ask me

about my parents, but I should've known better. Valentina never intrudes. I used to think it was because she was scared she'd lose her job if she did, but I've come to suspect that it's because she genuinely doesn't care. She truly is made of ice.

"I suppose that explains why you refused to cut him loose despite their company performance declining year-on-year for five years straight." She looks up then and smiles mischievously. "Perhaps you do have a heart buried somewhere deep within there."

Her eyes twinkle as she presses her index finger against my chest. That heart she doesn't think I have? It skips a fucking beat. I can't remember the last time she smiled at me so genuinely, and I don't recall her *ever* touching me in this way.

Before I realize what I'm doing, I've got my hand wrapped around her wrist and her palm pressed flat against my chest. Valentina's eyes widen a fraction, but she gives me nothing. She doesn't look as affected as I am.

"*You* tell *me*. Do I?" Does she notice that my heart beats a little faster than it should?

"No," she says, grinning. "I stand corrected. You're as heartless as ever."

The edges of my lips turn up as I loosen my hold on her wrist, letting her hand fall away.

Valentina is smiling as she reaches for my laptop on the coffee table, and I can't tear my eyes off her. I don't think I've ever seen her smile like that when it's just the two of us. She's given those smiles to every single one of my brothers, but never me.

"We need to finish the restructuring plans, and don't forget to go in for a final suit fitting for Ares and Hannah's wedding. It's coming up far sooner than you think."

I lean back as I think about everything we have on our plates for the next few months. If I can pull this off, I'll finally be able to make my father's dreams come true. We're so close.

Each of my siblings and I handle different areas of the Windsor conglomerate. Between us, we handle finance, media and PR, hotels, motor vehicles and tech, real estate, and some foreign holdings.

They're all industries the Windsors have entered in the last fifty years, under my grandmother's guidance. We've been tremendously successful,

but it’s the Finance industry we entered first. It’s Windsor Finance, and The Windsor Bank, that we’re best known for.

The company I run is the one my father ran before me. He may no longer be here to witness the direction I’ve taken with his firm, but I still want to make him proud. The vision he didn’t have a chance to realize is the one I’ll pursue.

Valentina logs into my laptop with a swipe of her index finger, and it suddenly occurs to me how much I’ve grown to trust her over the years. She’s the only one who knows about my expansion plans. I might not like her a whole lot, but I suspect Windsor Finance wouldn’t be what it is today without her.

When did it all change? I hated her when Grandma hired her and forced me to take her under my wing. Being employed directly by my grandmother meant I could never fire her, no matter how badly I wanted to — and I tried. I’ve tried everything to get rid of her, but I never could. At what point did I stop trying to chase her away?

“You’ll be my date to Ares’s wedding,” I inform her, my eyes roaming over her. “You know the drill. Keep every one of those fucking airheaded socialites away from me and steer me toward everyone we must network with. I’ll give you the guest list, and I expect you to know *everything* about *everyone*. This isn’t just a wedding.”

She nods and pastes a smile on her face. “Of course. I’ll be there, and I’ll be sure to remember everything there is to know, right down to names of every pet, child, and mistress.”

I nod and lean back against the sofa, my eyes drifting over her body. When did she go from being the woman I hated more than anything to becoming the one I trust above everyone else?

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Chapter Three

VALENTINA

“She’s a fool,” my mother mutters, her eyes glued to the television. She’s enraptured by the scene playing out in front of us, her face contorting in pain when the woman in the Telenovela we’re watching dismisses the lipstick on her husband’s shirt. “What a pitiful fool.”

Mom’s voice is tinged with a bitterness so strong I can taste it on my tongue. It envelops me and seeps in so deep that my own mood plummets. I instinctively tense, dread washing over me as I mentally prepare for the words I know will follow.

“You can’t trust men,” she says, perhaps more to herself than to me. “In the end, they’re all the same. Every single one of them will betray you eventually, trampling all over your heart and leaving you with the broken pieces of the life you thought you’d share.”

I stare at her, admiring her grit even as despair seeps in. I would be the last person to ever deny how much she's been through, but she fails to see how much damage *she's* doing — to herself and everyone around her. "Is that what I am to you, Mom? A broken piece? A reminder of the past?" The words I'd normally keep buried deep within roll off my tongue before I have a chance to swallow them down.

Mom's eyes flash as she turns to face me. "You know that isn't what I meant. If that's how I felt, I wouldn't have worked three jobs all my life just so I could raise you. If I hadn't been working this hard, I wouldn't be in this state now," she tells me, her gaze dropping to her legs.

The torment in her eyes tears me apart, and I instantly regret my words. If not for me, Mom wouldn't have been working in the factory that caused her to lose her mobility. Her legs will never be the same again, and she'll never be able to stand for more than an hour without being in excruciating pain. She might not explicitly say it, but I know she blames me. If I hadn't insisted on going to college, she wouldn't have taken that job.

Guilt hits me square in the chest, yet there's a hint of that same bitterness my mother just voiced blooming within me too. She may have had to sacrifice a lot for me, but I've done all I can to repay her.

"While your father raised his other child in pure luxury, he left us to starve," she grumbles. "He never looked back, not even when I struggled to buy you a winter coat, or when you couldn't afford your college tuition."

I force a smile, my heart heavy. It's always the same story. Her hatred for my father runs deep, and while I don't blame her, I wish she'd move on. It's been 21 years, and the venom she clings to is poisoning her and everything she touches. Hatred has taken more from her than my father ever did.

I sigh and force a smile as guilt articulates my next words. "But now you don't have to work another day in your life, Mom," I tell her softly. "I make more than enough to support both of us and Abuela for the rest of our lives."

Luca pays me an excessively high salary, and on top of that, he's provided me with an apartment near the office, and a car with a driver. He might be the devil incarnate, but he compensates me well for the ridiculous hours he asks me to work.

Mom nods and smiles at me, genuinely this time. "I'm proud of you," she says, her voice soft. "I always knew you'd make it far. You inherited my

intelligence, after all. You've had opportunities I could only dream of when I was your age."

I look away and try to push down the tinge of resentment I feel. Just once, I'd love for her to acknowledge my success without making it all about her. I love my mother beyond words, but she was never there when I was growing up. Unlike what she seems to believe, she wasn't the one who raised me. That was all Abuela.

Will there ever come a time that she'll look at me and truly see me? Sometimes it feels like all I am to her is a reflection of herself. Every week, I try my hardest to spend some quality time with her, but every single time, she ends up dwelling on the past, and there's nothing I can do to steer the conversation back to something more positive. I'm growing tired of trying, and even more so, I'm growing tired of the way I feel every time I see her.

All I ever want to do is show her my love for her, and perhaps receive a little bit of hers in return, but I end up feeling drained and discouraged every week. Every time I come home, I leave with reminders that I can't trust anyone, and that any happiness I may find would be fleeting.

When I was younger, I was convinced she was wrong. I thought that I'd be different, and that what happened to her would never happen to me. I thought I'd find an epic love of my own, and I'd have the happiness that had always eluded me. Somewhere, someday, I'd find a place where I'd belong, where I was wanted.

For a little while, I thought I'd found just that. In the end, my mother turned out to be right. Men truly can't be trusted, and promises are just a string of words we put too much value on. Honor only extends as far as it's convenient for it to, and love is a fleeting emotion.

Mom grimaces when the woman in her Telenovela is forced to admit to herself that her husband is cheating on her, and I look down at my phone, my entire body tense. I don't think I have it in me to take more of my mother's warnings tonight.

I clear my throat and push down the guilt I feel. "Mom," I say hesitantly. "I need to go. Something came up at work."

She nods instantly. "Go," she tells me. "Your work is important. The only two things you can truly rely on are your education and your own income, Valentina."

I stare at her for a moment. Shouldn't that list include her, too? Shouldn't I be able to rely on my mother too? I briefly felt bad for lying to

her, but my guilt has eased a little now.

I walk up to her and press a kiss to her cheek before heading to the front door of the home she shares with my abuela, the same home I grew up in. This place should fill me with warmth and happiness, but it never has, not truly.

"Val? Are you leaving?"

I pause at the sound of Abuela's voice. She's leaning back against the wall in the hallway, a cup of aqua de sandía in one hand and a plastic bag in the other.

"I… yes… um, something came up at work."

Abuela smiles at me, a knowing look in her eyes. "You have never been able to lie to me, Val." She holds up a supermarket bag, no doubt filled with miscellaneous Tupperware. Abuela loves collecting old butter and yoghurt containers, and I can never be sure what's inside them. Guessing before I open them has become my favorite game. "For you, Princesa. It's still warm. Share it with that handsome boss of yours. Save him some."

I stare at her wide-eyed. "How... how did you know I was going to the office?"

Leaving was an impulse decision. How could she possibly have known I'd do that *and* have had enough time to pack me food?

"You always hide behind your work when you're upset." She gives me the bag and wraps her hand over mine. "Your mother's heart is in the right place, mi niña. She means well. She doesn't want you to suffer the way she did, but the way she tries to protect you is all wrong. Don't mind her, okay?"

She always knows exactly what to say to take the edge off my disappointment. "I love you, Abuelita."

She nods. "I love you more, Val. I always will."

I inhale shakily and hug her tightly. She looks and feels a little frailer than she used to, and it worries me. "Impossible," I promise her. "I love you the most."

She laughs, the sound easing the ache my mother caused. Thanks to her, I'm smiling as I get into my car, my night salvaged a little.

For a moment I wonder whether I should text my friends, Sierra and Raven, but then I think better of it. It's ridiculous, but I feel guilty for telling my mother that I needed to work. I can't help it. Because that's the excuse I gave her, I now feel like I should at least do a little bit of work.

I sigh as I pull up in front of the office. The night guard greets me by name, and self-pity threatens to overwhelm me as the doors in Luca's private elevator close. I'm twenty-eight, and I don't have a social life outside of work. Even my two closest friends are people I know through my boss. It's pathetic.

The office is deserted tonight, and I sigh as I walk toward my desk. I should be going out and hanging out with friends, yet here I am, at the office on a Saturday night.

I pause mid-step when I realize that the lights are on in Luca's corner office and frown in confusion. I know he has nothing on his schedule tonight, so what could he possibly be doing here tonight?

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Chapter Four

VALENTINA

Luca looks up in surprise when I walk in, a frown marring his handsome face as his gaze roams over my attire. I look down at myself, taking in the jeans and t-shirt I'm wearing, embarrassment rendering me speechless for a moment. I can count the times I've been around him in casual clothing on one hand. I never compromise on my professionalism, and neither does he.

I still remember the warning he gave me when we first started working together. He told me to never walk into his office wearing anything I couldn't attend a board meeting in, and until today, I never have.

"Valentina," he says, his tone as emotionless as it always is. We've been working together for years, yet he still calls me by my full name. I'm *Val* to everyone but him. From the very start, he's made it clear that he dislikes me

and that he intends to keep me at a distance. I suspect that some of his wariness comes from the fact that it's his grandmother who hired me, but despite his endless questioning, I'm as clueless about her rationale as he is.

"Luca." I force a smile onto my face and take a hesitant step closer. I don't recall the last time I felt awkward around him, but I do now. I don't have a legitimate reason to be at the office tonight, and I'm worried he'll be suspicious of me. Despite his continuous mistrust, I've never given him a reason to doubt me, but being at the office on a Saturday night when he knows better than anyone that there's nothing for me to work on? Even I have to admit that it's weird.

"What are you doing here?" he asks, eventually.

I look away as I contemplate how to answer and decide on partial honesty. Luca must be handled with care. For years, he's jumped on any excuse to fire me, and I can't risk losing this job. His grandmother has shielded me from his worst attempts, but someday, my luck will run out. When it does, it's my family that'll suffer the most. "I just… I wasn't having the best evening, and I wasn't sure where to go. I just ended up at the office without thinking."

I expected Luca to pity me, but instead, he simply nods. "Yeah, me too," he says, his voice soft. I thought he'd have more to say, or that he'd question me further, but instead, he remains silent and stares back at his computer screen.

This is, perhaps, one of the very few things I appreciate about him, other than his disgustingly good looks. Luca Windsor never pries into my private life. The boundaries between us are as firmly in place as they were eight years ago, when we first started working together. He despised me then, and I'm certain he still does today — but he respects me too, and ultimately, that's all that matters.

"Do you have dinner plans?" I ask as I hold up the bag my grandmother gave me. He's dressed in a three-piece suit, as usual, and I know for a fact that he doesn't have any business meetings scheduled today. A date, perhaps?

He crosses his arms and leans back in his seat, his eyes on mine. There's something captivating about Luca Windsor. He has this habit of making women feel like they have his full attention, and I'm not immune to it either, despite my best attempts to resist him. "Dinner? When do I ever have

dinner plans that you aren't aware of? I don't date, and you know it. There's no point, anyway."

I blink in surprise. Right. In all the years I've known him, he's never had a girlfriend. The Windsor marriages are all arranged, so eventually, he'll have to marry a woman of his grandmother's choosing. Probably a rich heiress of some sort that can further expand their empire. I can see why someone like Luca wouldn't bother dating because of it. No doubt he finds it an inefficient waste of his time.

I place my food on his desk and unpack it, secretly excited as I open the butter container my abuela packed for me. Luca looks surprised when I give him a taquito wrapped in foil, and I smile at him politely. What did he think I was about to give him? A handful of butter? "My grandmother made it, and I don't enjoy eating alone. Indulge me?"

He hesitates for a moment, and then he nods. I suppose it isn't often that we find ourselves together unexpectedly, without a specific work agenda or social obligation to fulfill.

We eat in silence for a while, and I take a moment to study him. He's irritatingly handsome, with that strong jaw, that straight nose, and his thick dark hair. His good looks don't make up for his complete lack of personality, though. I can't even imagine him acting affectionate. Does he even know how to smile, or have his facial muscles completely atrophied due to lack of use?

I sigh and look away. I suppose he's also intelligent beyond compare, loyal to a fault, and he loves his family more than anything. His personality is abrasive, and he's far too blunt for his own good, but he isn't cruel or unfair.

Even back when he so desperately tried to make me quit my job when I was first hired, everything he did only helped me in the long run — the multiple languages he made me learn, the college night classes he forced me to take, and even the MBA he asked me to do. None of it was to my detriment, even if I did despise him for it at the time. I hate to admit it, but he's going to make some poor girl very happy someday.

"Do you know who she is? The woman you'll marry?" The question escapes my lips before I even realize it, and the hint of despair that accompanies it surprises me. I only ever ask Luca personal questions when I need the information to do my job, but I couldn't help myself.

He freezes for a moment, but then he shakes his head. “No idea, but since Ares’s wedding is coming up soon, I’ll probably be next.”

I lean back in my chair and nod, my thoughts wandering. “Do you think Raven will do it?” I ask, my voice soft. A week ago, Ares’s fiancée called off the wedding, and Raven, one of my closest friends and the bride’s younger sister, was asked to take her place as Ares’s wife. It’s the only way for both families to abide by the terms of their merger. The merged company was meant to fall into the hands of any kids resulting from this marriage, and without a marriage between the Windsors and the Du Ponts, there’ll be no merger.

I know more than anyone just how much Raven loves Ares, but I also know how hard it’d be for her to marry a man that thinks he’s in love with her sister.

“Yes,” Luca says, his voice unwavering. “Raven and Ares are meant to be together. The only ones who can’t see it are them. Ultimately, this’ll work out for the better.”

I stare at him, feeling oddly uneasy. He’s right to say that he’s probably next. Once Ares is married, their grandmother’s attention will fall to Luca. What would it be like if Luca were married? What kind of woman will end up becoming his wife?

I wonder if he’d treat her with the same tenderness and kindness that he reserves for his sister and grandmother. The thought of it… it doesn’t sit well with me, and I can’t quite figure out why.

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Chapter Five

LUCA

The atmosphere is tense as my brothers and I take our places at the end of the aisle, by Ares's side. An arranged marriage is hard enough as it is, but not knowing who is going to walk down that aisle today must be nerve-racking. For Ares's sake, I hope it's Raven, and not the woman he was supposed to marry. None of us ever liked Hannah anyway.

My eyes roam over the gorgeous vineyard the wedding is being held at, the feeling bittersweet. It's a beautiful wedding, befitting both the Windsor and Du Pont names, but it feels empty. It's all a big pretense, a merger with two lives as collateral. This is how it's always been for my family, but until now, it didn't feel quite as real.

Ares is the first one of us to get married, but each of us will have to follow in his footsteps. I'll likely be next. If it were up to me, I'd never get

married at all. I have no desire to tie myself down with archaic contracts, and I most certainly don't want or need anyone invading my personal space until my dying day. I can't imagine anything worse.

I run a hand through my hair, a sense of inexplicable loss washing over me. My grandmother and each of her siblings were in arranged marriages, and so were my parents. It's how we keep the Windsor family well-connected and invincible. It's how it's always been, and none of us will stray from the paths paved for us, but I can't help but wonder what it was like for my parents. Thoughts of them no longer torment me, but on days like today, I miss them. If they were here today, what would they have to say to Ares, to all of us?

"It's for the best," Lex says, and I nod in agreement.

"She might still change her mind," Ares replies, and we all shake our heads in unison. I fucking hope Hannah doesn't change her mind.

"She won't," Zane adds. "And someday you'll thank her for it."

Dion inhales deeply and turns to face Ares. "Whatever happens today, Ares, remember that you're a Windsor, and none of us choose our wives. It's a tradition that's served us well for generations, so have some faith, okay?"

Ares glares at him. "I'll be sure to remind you of that when it's your turn." Even from here, I can see Faye, Dion's fiancée, sitting in the back. He's the only one of us, other than Ares, whose engagement had been decided upon years ago. Despite that, he and his fiancée barely speak. I suppose part of that is because he lives in London, but I wonder if there's more to it.

Does seeing her remind him of our parents? She lost her mother in the same plane crash that took our parents from us, after all. It's hard enough to make an arranged marriage work without that kind of baggage. I run a hand through my hair and shake my head. He can't evade her forever.

"Would it really be so bad to marry Raven?" Lex asks. "How about I take your place?"

Ares is the calmest of us, trained to keep his face completely expressionless as he faces the media on all our behalf's, but Lexington's words make him lose his cool. Pure fury distorts his face as he turns toward Lex.

"What?" Lex asks provocatively. "Can't stand the idea of Raven being with anyone else? I thought you didn't want her as your wife?"

“Fuck off,” Ares says through gritted teeth, much to my amusement. He has no idea that Hannah calling off the wedding is the best thing that’ll ever happen to him.

Music starts to play, and Ares’s entire body relaxes when he sees Raven standing at the end of the aisle, her father by her side. He smiles, unable to take his eyes off her, and I can’t help but shake my head. Fucking fool.

My brothers and I all breathe a sigh of relief when Raven’s father places her hand in Ares’s. It might not feel like it to them, but I have no doubt today is the result of destiny interrupting the paths they tried to forge. No matter what they did, I always knew their roads would end up merging, whether they like it or not. I’m glad it’s through marriage, because I suspect even a social construct like that wouldn’t have kept them apart.

I stare ahead during the ceremony, my eyes roaming over the crowd and settling on Valentina. She’s dressed in a beautiful red gown today, and it highlights her body perfectly. Even from here, she’s eye-catching and mesmerizing. Valentina wields her beauty like a weapon, and it’s one I’m glad is in my arsenal. She’s the perfect piece of armor, and she’s extraordinarily skilled at keeping coveting eyes at a distance from me.

Today, more so than ever, I need her. The sheer number of socialites eying me sickens me. I might pretend that I don’t, but I hear the rumors, the speculation. Everyone wants to know who my fiancée will be, and at least a handful of families here today are hoping it’ll be their daughter. It’s disgusting how eager they are to sell away their own flesh and blood. Watching Valentina handle them will be the highlight of my day.

There was a time I thought I’d found someone I wanted to marry even if it cost me everything, someone I loved beyond reason. I wish I knew then what I know now. Relationships are always transactional, and there’s no such thing as unconditional love. Hell, I don’t even believe love truly exists, and if it does, it’s fickle as fuck. It’s not an emotion I ever care to experience again. I suppose, in that way, an arranged marriage is a saving grace.

The crowd cheers when Ares kisses Raven, and I smirk to myself. The way he’s kissing her… yeah, he’s betraying how badly he wants her, and he doesn’t even realize it. Fucking moron.

I watch as the bride and groom walk away together, hand in hand. Ares has no idea how lucky he is — and not just because Raven is one of the most wonderful women I know. Love isn’t part of my plan, but Ares isn’t

like me. He’s a hopeless romantic, and he wants a true marriage, the kind he’ll have with Raven. Just because I don’t want it for myself doesn’t mean I’m not happy my brother gets to experience it at least.

Yeah, even now, when their lives are in turmoil and the future looks uncertain, I can see it. There’s something between them that wasn’t there between Ares and Hannah.

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Chapter Six

LUCA

"Just one more photo," Grandma says, a smile on her face. Raven and Ares both look weary and uncertain, but Grandma looks excessively happy. It's almost as though they walked right into her trap. I suppose, in some ways, they did. If not for her insistence, they wouldn't be standing here today.

"Grams," I say, my tone indulgent as I wrap my arm around her waist. I pull her against me and smirk. "How about we let the happy couple rest? You're turning this into a work event for my darling sister-in-law. She already has to model for hours on end, day after day. Let's join the rest of our guests at the reception, shall we?"

She looks up at me with a sweet smile and nods. When she looks like that, it's easy to forget that she's the Windsor matriarch, the one who raised

us all when we lost our parents. My grandmother rules our family with an iron fist, but on days like today, she looks like any grandmother would at a wedding. She looks proud and emotional, her eyes filled with genuine happiness for Ares and Raven.

I wonder if she'd look that way if it was Hannah that had married Ares. I don't recall her ever smiling that way at Hannah.

I offer my grandmother my arm, and she loops hers through it. "Fine," she grumbles, "but you owe me a dance."

A soft chuckle escapes my lips as I lead her into the reception hall. "A dance with my favorite lady? It's an honor."

She narrows her eyes at me as I take her hand. "You're a smooth talker, just like your father was."

I pause, stunned for a moment. Grandma rarely speaks about my parents, so to hear her mentioning Dad so casually is surprising. She smiles at me as I pull her onto the dance floor, a slow ballad resounding through the room.

"It's hard not to think of James on a day like today," she says, a tinge of longing in her eyes. "He'd be so proud of Ares, and he'd welcome Raven with open arms. Not a day goes by without me thinking of them. I just hope I managed to raise your siblings and you the way your parents would have."

My grandmother is a titan, a force to be reckoned with. She doesn't show weaknesses, and for the longest time, I didn't think she had any. "You've done an amazing job, Grandma," I reassure her. "I don't even want to imagine what might have happened to us if not for you."

She reaches up and cups my cheek gently. Her fingers feel thinner than they used to, and she seems smaller than I remember her being. "You know that everything I do is for you and your siblings, right?"

There's something in her tone that makes me pause, and I nod hesitantly. "Of course." Somehow, her words feel like an omen, and I can't push aside the discomfort I feel.

"Good. Always remember that."

I twirl my grandmother around as I mull over her words. She's a strategist, and nothing she ever says can be taken at face value.

I'm snapped out of my thoughts by the sound of familiar laughter, and I glance over, my eyes widening when I see Valentina dancing with a man I know all too well. He pulls her close, and she grins up at him. There's something in her eyes that I've never seen before, and it does something to

me. It’s rare to hear her laugh so genuinely, and I can’t help but wonder what he said to her. What did he say to earn her laughter?

She’s never looked at me that way before, and she’s certainly never laughed for me that way. Laughed at me behind my back, perhaps, but never with me. I didn’t think she could get any more beautiful, but watching her smile that way… yeah. She’s without a doubt the most beautiful woman I know. I fucking hate that she’s showing that fucker a part of her that she hides from me. He doesn’t deserve it. No one does. Not even me.

“Luca?”

I blink and force my attention back to my grandmother. “Hmm? What did you say, Grams?”

Her eyes twinkle, and she smiles at me. “I said, doesn’t Valentina look great dancing with Joshua Rivera? Perhaps your marriage isn’t the only one I should arrange. She isn’t getting any younger either, and you keep her so busy at work that she hasn’t had time to date. It’d be good for her to find a man that’ll love and appreciate her.”

“*What*?” My eyes widen at her insinuation, and I glance back at Valentina. “No,” I snap. “Absolutely not.” My tone is harsh, and I expected it to take my grandmother by surprise, since I’ve never spoken to her that way before, but she merely smiles.

“Why not?” she asks as we sway on the dance floor. “He’s handsome and rich, and they’re in the same industry. He’ll take good care of her, and I think he’ll make her happy. She can’t work for you forever, Luca. Besides, do you see the way he looks at her?”

I stare at Valentina, taking in her relaxed expression and the flirtatious look in her eyes. Anger unlike anything I’ve ever experienced before settles deep in my stomach, and I clench my jaw in an effort to suppress it.

“They’d make such beautiful babies together,” Grandma says, her tone amused. “Don’t you think?”

Joshua’s hand dips a little lower, until his fingertips are brushing right over her ass, and he pulls her flush against him. I expected her to push away from him, but she smiles up at him.

For a moment, thoughts of the two of them flash through my mind. *His lips on hers, a soft moan escaping her lips as she rises to her tiptoes… his hands roaming over her body, feeling every single one of those irresistible curves, her eyes filling with lust.* Each thought torments me further, until I can barely stand it.

I grit my teeth and take a step away from my grandmother. “Excuse me, Grandma,” I tell her, barely able to restrain my anger. “Come to think of it, there’s something I need to discuss with Valentina.”

“Very well, Luca.” She smiles as I walk away, as though she knows I was lying but is letting it be.

Valentina’s eyes meet mine before I reach her, and that beautiful smile melts right off her face. Why is it that she’s always so expressionless around me, when she laughs like that around assholes like Joshua?

I grit my teeth and reach for her, my hand wrapping around her waist as I pull her away from Joshua and into my arms in one smooth move.

She gasps, her eyes wide as she crashes into me, her body flush against mine. “Luca?” she murmurs, a hint of confusion in those stunning hazel eyes.

“What the hell are you doing, Windsor?” Joshua asks, an undercurrent of genuine anger in his tone. He looks at her with such longing that I can’t help but tighten my grip.

“Apologies,” I say through gritted teeth. “She’s mine.”

Valentina’s eyes widen, and she glances at Joshua. “He means that I work for him,” she clarifies, and I smirk as I push her hair behind her ear.

“He knew what I meant,” I tell her as I pull her into a dance. Her arms wrap around my neck, our bodies in the same position she was just in with Joshua. It’s far too intimate. Standing here like this… he’d have felt her entire body pressing against his. The feel of her soft curves against my chest is almost too much. I don’t have to guess to know what that swine was thinking as he danced with her. It’s impossible not to want her.

Valentina frowns as we sway to the music the live band is playing. “What was that all about?” she asks.

“Why?” I snap. “Annoyed I pulled you away from Joshua? You seemed to be having such a good time you forgot you’re on the clock. This isn’t a social event for you. You’re here to work.”

She glares at me and steps on my foot before pasting a mock apologetic look onto her face. “Oops,” she says. “Sorry.”

She really does make a mockery of me every chance she gets. I pull her closer and thread one hand through her hair, the tips of my fingers trailing over her scalp. An image of her on her knees in front of me flashes through my mind, my cock in between those beautiful full lips of hers, my hand in

her hair the way I've got it now. "Childish," I tell her as I tighten my grip on her, my touch possessive.

"No more than you are," she retorts. "You don't like others playing with your toys, huh?"

I chuckle and lower my face to hers. Even with the heels she's wearing today, she's at least a full head shorter than me. "Valentina, if I ever were to play with you, you'd never look at another again. I'd have you so hooked, you'd want no one's hands on your body but mine."

Her cheeks flush, and she averts her gaze, her annoyance draining away. "W-what are you even talking about?" she stammers.

The song comes to an end, and I grab her hand. "Follow me," I murmur as I lead her through the wide doors and onto the candlelit path in the vineyard.

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Chapter Seven

VALENTINA

Luca holds my hand tightly as we deviate from the candlelit path that connects the wedding and reception venues. He seems angry, but I'm uncertain why. Is it because I was distracted for a bit? He brought me here to network and shield him, but instead of that, I've been sipping wine and dancing, when I know how he feels about unprofessionalism — no matter how momentarily.

I gasp when my heels sink into the grass, and Luca looks back over his shoulder, his gaze dark as he lets go of my hand. "Struggling?" he asks, his voice soft despite the anger flashing through his eyes.

Before I even have a chance to reply, he leans in, startling me. He wraps one arm behind my back and the other behind my knees as he lifts me into

his arms with ease. “*Luca*,” I murmur, my tone betraying my surprise. “What are you doing?”

He tightens his grip on me until he’s got my head resting against his shoulder, my lips brushing over his neck. Up close, his cologne is even more intoxicating than usual.

Luca’s body feels strong against mine, and it does something to me. I felt the same way when we danced together too. He affects me in a way no one else ever has. He makes me feel protected, irritated, and flustered, all at once.

The music fades away with every step he takes, until it’s barely audible in the distance. “Luca,” I whisper. “Where are you taking me?”

He smiles at me as he steps into a wooden gazebo illuminated by the full moon above us. “I saw this on the way here, and I wondered what it’d look like at night.”

He puts me down gently and I take a step back, dazed. It’s beautiful, and it’s almost like I stepped right into a dream. The wooden gazebo is lit with fairy lights, the moon and stars twinkling above us. “What are we doing here?” I ask, my heart racing.

Luca smiles humorlessly and steps closer, making me retreat, until my back hits one of the gazebo’s pillars. He places his arms on either side of me, caging me in. The way he looks at me makes my heart race, and tonight, more than ever, I wish I could read the thoughts he keeps behind lock and key.

“Have you finally lost your mind?” I ask, my voice soft. “Did I drive you insane at last?”

He smiles at me, yet his gaze exudes loneliness. Luca reaches for me, the tips of his fingers brushing over my temple tenderly. I inhale sharply and lean back against the pillar, my eyes on his. He looks dangerous tonight, his usually unreadable mask cracked.

His hand wraps around the back of my neck for a moment, before he pushes it up and into my hair, until he’s holding me the way he did on the dance floor. I inhale sharply when he steps closer to me, his body brushing against mine.

“Yes. I think you have.” He tightens his grip on my hair and tilts my face up toward his as he leans in. “You drive me truly, utterly, entirely, *mad*,” he whispers, his forehead pressed against mine.

Just a little closer, and his lips would be on mine. I shouldn't want a taste of him, but I do. Perhaps it's the wine, or the moonlight. Maybe it's a little bit of both. All I know is that I want the one thing I should never crave. Him.

"Luca," I whisper, my tone pleading.

He groans and grips my hair tightly as his lips come crashing down on mine with the same urgency I'm feeling. I moan against his lips and open up for him, needing more. Every thought fades away as my arms wrap around his neck, his body flush against mine.

"Fuck," he murmurs against my lips, before wrapping his hands around my waist. "You taste as sweet as I always knew you would." He lifts me up against the gazebo, and my legs wrap around his hips as my dress falls open at the slit by my thigh. "Sweet as sin."

His touch is restless as his hands roam over my body. The way he moves his hips as he kisses me drives me insane. He's hard for me, and the way he pushes up against me is positively sinful. It's too much and not enough all at once.

I pull on his bowtie, and he moves away a little to let me yank it off. "Valentina," he groans, before taking my lips all over again. I let his bowtie fall to the floor and brush my fingers over the buttons on his shirt, sending a few of them flying in an attempt to get closer to him.

"More," I plead, my lips never leaving his. I don't remember the last time I allowed myself to be ruled by desire, but nothing has ever felt more right. Perhaps this has always been inevitable.

His shirt comes undone, and I let it fall open, my hands roaming over his chest and abs. I always knew he was muscular, but seeing isn't the same as touching. He feels incredible against my fingers, and the way he groans as my fingertips brush over the ridges of his abs makes me smile.

"*Valentina*," he warns, his teeth nipping at my bottom lip. I groan and tilt my head in a silent bid for more, and he grants it, kissing me deeply and slowly.

His hand makes its way between us, and I gasp against his mouth when his fingers brush over the silk thong I'm wearing tonight. "Wet," he groans as he teases me, his fingers stroking me through the fabric. "Your pussy is so fucking wet, baby. You're soaking my fingers straight through this." He pushes my panties aside, and a needy moan escapes my lips when he pushes a finger into me.

“Luca,” I moan, breathless.

He grunts and kisses me harder. “Yes,” he growls. “Just like that, baby. I want my name on your lips, just like that. No one but me.”

I roll my hips against him, and he repositions his arms, holding me up with one arm while using the other to tease me.

He pulls away a little to look at me, and heat rushes to my cheeks. I have no doubt I look like a complete mess. My lips feel swollen, and my hair must be all over the place, yet he looks at me like I’m the most beautiful thing he’s ever seen. “Fuck,” he whispers, his fingers moving quicker, his touch more merciless than before.

I look away, suddenly feeling shy and wanting to escape his intense gaze, but he won’t let me. “Look at me,” he orders, his fingers pausing.

I obey, and he smiles in satisfaction, his gaze heated.

“You want to come for me, don’t you, Valentina?”

I nod and bite down on my lip.

“Then look at me, baby.” His thumb swipes over my clit, and my lips part as soft moans fill the air between us. “Good girl,” he whispers. “Don’t take your eyes off me, Valentina. You’re mine, baby. Your moans, your pleasure, your body. It’s all mine. *Only mine*.”

He smiles as I struggle to hold on and shakes his head. “Come for me, baby. I’m right here to catch you. Just let it happen.”

I can’t remember the last time a man was able to bring me such pleasure. It requires too much trust, and I don’t have a lot of it left to give. “*Please*,” I whisper.

His touch becomes rougher, and my moans turn more wanton. He makes me unable to recognize myself as he pushes me over the edge. “*Luca*,” I moan as my muscles tighten around his fingers, pleasure rushing through my body in a way it never has before.

He smirks, and then he leans in to kiss me, his touch gentler now. He kisses me so sweetly and leisurely that my heart can’t help but skip a beat. My hands run over his chest and up, until I’ve got my arms wrapped around his neck, the tips of my fingers at his nape. I pull him closer, desperate for more, but he pulls away, the smile melting off his face.

“The next time you want this, you come to me,” he tells me, his expression hardening. “Stay away from Joshua. He’s not for you.”

I blink in confusion as he lowers me to the floor and cages me in, his forearms on either side of my head. I look into his eyes, my racing heart

beating in a different rhythm than before. “What are you… what are you talking about, Luca?”

He smiles humorlessly and brushes my hair out of my face, his gaze cold. “If you want to become some rich guy’s mistress, then do it in your own time. Do not use my network for personal gain, especially not at an event like this. It’s fucking embarrassing to see you flirt with him so blatantly, when you’re here representing *me*. Do I really need to remind you of the contract you signed? If I ever catch you behaving this way again, I’ll fire you. Not even my grandmother will be able to save you.”

My heart sinks, and I look away to hide the sudden pain his words inflict. It’s rare for Luca to render me speechless, yet that’s exactly what he’s done. Everything that happened between us just now… what was that? Did he touch me just because of Joshua?

Luca glares at me and closes the distance between us, his eyes on mine. “Tell me, Valentina. Are you tired of working? You’re just like all the women around me, huh? The very same ones you were supposed to shield me from today.”

I look up at him, my pain slowly morphing into anger. “Are you seriously calling me a gold digger? Because I *danced* with someone? You truly have lost your mind, haven’t you?”

“You call that dancing?” he snaps. “His hands were all over your body, and you seemed to be enjoying every second of it. He’s one of our biggest competitors, and you know it. Do you really think he approached you for a simple dance? Or did you know that’s not all he wanted? How far were you going to take it? How much would you have given him? Had it been Joshua that led you out here, would you have kissed him the way you kissed me?”

I stare at him, my heart sinking. I truly am nothing but a possession to him, a toy he doesn’t want to share. He has no real interest in me, other than wanting to prevent me from falling into anyone else’s hands.

“Is that why you touched me the way you did?” I ask, my voice soft. “Because you thought I’d walk out of the reception venue with Joshua instead? Because you thought he’d be able to seduce me, and I’d leak corporate secrets?”

We’ve worked together for years, and I’ve had countless opportunities to betray him, most of them lucrative to a point I’d never have to work another day in my life. Throughout it all, I remained loyal and stayed by his side, because even if he didn’t seem to like me, he seemed to respect my

work and treated me fairly. I thought we'd developed a mutual level of understanding of each other, but I couldn't have been more wrong.

Luca looks away, and his silence speaks volumes. He still truly doesn't trust me. I run a hand through my hair and take a calming breath before pasting a smile onto my face.

"It looks like you misunderstood, Luca. I'm not sure what I could do or say to make you believe otherwise, but quite frankly, I'm tired of having to prove myself to you. I genuinely thought you knew me better than this."

I push against his chest, and he takes a step away from me, his expression unreadable. "But you don't, do you? Eight years, and you still don't know me at all."

I turn and walk away, my eyes filling with tears that I refuse to spill. How could I have thought that Luca Windsor wanted me, for even a single second? I should've known better.

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Chapter Eight

LUCA

Valentina isn’t at her desk when I walk into the office, and I check my pocket watch, my head throbbing. It’s nine in the morning, so she’s likely in a meeting by now.

I run a hand through my hair, the weekend’s events running through my mind. I fucked up. I never should’ve said any of that shit to her, and I certainly shouldn’t have touched her. I’m neither impulsive nor emotional yet seeing her with Joshua pissed me off beyond reason. I wasn’t thinking clearly at all. All I could think about was making her mine before he ever even had a chance with her. It was irrational and so unlike me that even I can’t figure out why I acted that way.

True remorse fucking guts me when I see the pink sticky note on my desk, two tablets on top of it and a glass of water beside it. *For your*

inevitable hangover, it reads. How did she know? I haven't spoken to her since the wedding, so how did she know that Lex, Dion, Zane and I were out drinking all weekend? I suppose she knew that's what we would've done, since Dion isn't in town often. She knows me better than anyone else, and it fucking kills me.

Eight years, and you still don't know me at all. Those words have haunted me all weekend, interspersed with entirely different thoughts. I've been fucked up over her, my mind replaying the way she looked at me, the way her pussy felt and the way she moaned my name. How the fuck am I ever supposed to forget that? How could I look at her and not want more?

I grab the pills and pop them into my mouth, praying my head stops throbbing soon, so I can find a way to apologize to Valentina. I don't know what possessed me to lash out at her the way I did.

Throughout the years, she and I have never had a true argument — in part because Valentina never let it get that far. I have no idea how to handle this situation. I can't even remember the last time I apologized to anyone at all. How do you even apologize for what I did? Is it at all possible to go back to the way we used to be?

I watch through my glass office wall as she finally walks toward her desk, a stack of documents in her hands. She looks painfully beautiful today, in that cream-colored dress and that red lipstick. I'm fucking done for, because all I can think about is wanting to smear that lipstick of hers. If I hadn't intervened, would she have gone home with Joshua? Would it have been his name on those pretty lips of hers? Violence thrums through my veins at the mere thought of her in his arms.

I lean forward and bury my face in my hands. What the fuck is wrong with me? I've never once intruded in her life. I have no idea if she has a boyfriend, or if there's anyone special in her life, but I know that logically, I haven't left her with enough time for any of that. Why do I suddenly care about things I never even used to wonder about, and how do I stop? My usual list of reasons to despise Valentina Diaz rings hollow today, yet I force myself to go through it in a desperate attempt to control the way she's made me feel.

1. I'd be a fool to lose her as my secretary because she's the single best employee I have

2. She's friends with my sister and sister-in-law

3. My grandmother adores her, and she'd be furious if she found out

4. She was forced on me and likely is one of my grandmother's spies

5. I'll be marrying someone else

Yeah, I don't give a fuck about any of that if it means I can get another taste of her. This is exactly why I've stayed away all this time. Deep down, I always knew one touch would be enough to hook me.

My finger hovers over the call button on my desk, but a sudden bout of nerves prevents me from clicking it. What in the fuck? When have I ever been nervous?

I press it, and Valentina looks up, her eyes finding mine through the glass. "Can you come in?" I ask, my tone far harsher than I was going for.

She nods and rises to her feet, her eyes never leaving mine as she walks in. She doesn't look mad or affected in any way, and I can't tell if that's good or bad. "Good morning, Luca," she says, that irritating polite smile on her face. Just once, I want to see her laugh for me the way she laughed for Joshua.

"Valentina."

She stares at me expectedly, and I lean back in my seat, unsure what to say. "What can I do for you?" Her tone is so polite, so distant. This is the Valentina I've always known, but I'm starting to realize that I'm the only one who gets this cold and detached version of her. I want her on her knees in between my legs, her pretty lips wide open and lust lighting up those beautiful eyes of hers. I want to witness her unravel, piece by piece, until she's lost in desire the way she was last weekend.

I grit my teeth and try my hardest to dismiss the thought. "I'm sorry," I tell her, my voice soft.

Her eyes widen, and she crosses her arms. "If anything, it should be me who apologizes." She looks away for a moment. "I'm sorry for leaving early when you'd ordered me to attend as your date. I failed in my duties." She looks back at me and forces a smile. "You were right. I forgot my place. I'd gotten so comfortable around your family and in social situations such as Ares and Raven's wedding, that I forgot that I don't belong in your world. I never will. I'll never be more than a replaceable employee, someone who would only ever be a mistress, but never a wife. That's what you accused me of, isn't it? Wanting to be Joshua's *mistress*, despite him having neither a girlfriend nor a wife?"

She tucks a strand of hair behind her ear, and my eyes drop to her trembling fingers. Her voice is firm, but her body betrays the pain I

inflicted. How do I make this better? How do I earn her forgiveness?

“I heard your warning loud and clear, Luca. I overstepped, and my behavior could reflect badly on you. The last thing you need is rumors about your executive secretary attempting to find a sugar daddy. That is what you’re worried about, isn’t it?” She smiles humorlessly. “I truly, sincerely, apologize. This reminder is exactly what I needed. It will never happen again. You needn’t worry about me embarrassing you any further. I won’t risk losing my job.”

Fuck. What the fuck have I done? “Valentina,” I say, unsure what exactly to tell her. “I didn’t… you’re misunderstanding.”

“Am I?”

How do I deny her words without admitting that I was merely jealous? I’m in no position to be jealous of who she dances with, yet that’s exactly what happened. I couldn’t stand the idea of her being in his arms, of her laughing with him when she barely smiles at me. Joshua doesn’t date women exclusively, and he has no intention of ever getting married. I don’t want to see her with anyone else, but least of all with someone like him. He’d never make her his girlfriend or wife — he’d play with her feelings and discard her.

I’ve worked hard to keep a certain amount of distance between us, and each and every day, I remind myself of the countless reasons I should despise her instead of want her… but I don’t think we can ever go back to the way we used to be. Not now I know how she looks when she comes for me.

“I need you to know that I have the utmost respect for you, Valentina. You are, without a doubt, the most valuable resource Windsor Finance has. I was out of line, and if anyone overstepped, it was me. I said things I didn’t mean, and if I could take back my words, I would. Hell, it isn’t just my words I’d take back. It’s my actions too. I don’t think I’ve ever regretted anything quite as much as I do that night. I care about you more than you might think, and the last thing I ever intended to do was hurt you.”

How could I have touched her when I know that I can never have her? There’s only one way I get to keep her in my life, and it’s as my employee, nothing more. I can’t risk jeopardising our precarious working relationship any further.

She flinches and grits her teeth. “You’re not the only one who regrets it, Luca,” she tells me, the anger draining from her voice, leaving only

remorse. “I’d much rather we never speak of this again.”

She runs a hand through her hair and scoffs, her anger returning with a vengeance. “And Windsor Finance’s most valuable *resource*,” she repeats, a mocking smile on her face. “Right. That’s exactly what I am to you, huh? How could I, for even one single second, have forgotten?”

Fuck. *Fuck*. “I didn’t mean it that way,” I rush to tell her.

Valentina’s eyes flash with anger. “You seem to be saying and doing a lot of things you allegedly don’t mean,” she retorts. “Perhaps you should consider refraining from saying anything at all.”

She’s telling me to shut the fuck up, huh? “I…”

“You have a meeting in ten minutes,” she interrupts, pure fury in her eyes. “I will email you everything you need for it.”

Then she walks out, leaving me staring after her. How did I manage to make things even worse?

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Chapter Nine

VALENTINA

"Val?"

I look up at the sound of my abuela's voice and find her standing in the doorway of my bedroom. "Abuelita? What are you doing here?"

Her eyes roam over my face, a hint of concern in them. "I rang the doorbell twice, but you didn't hear me, eh? I was worried about you, so I came to take a look. You haven't come home in a while."

I rise to my feet and grab her hands, noting how cold they are. "How did you get here?"

She smiles at me. "I took the bus and walked. I called you a few times earlier, but you didn't pick up. I had a bad feeling, so I used the code on your fancy door lock."

I lift our joined hands to my face and warm her hand on my cheek. “I’m sorry, Abuelita. I’ve just been busy with work. I should’ve come to see you and Mom.”

She leads me to my living room and sits me down before taking my hands in hers. “You didn’t come home because you were worried I’d ask too many questions.”

I blink in surprise. “What do you mean?” I ask hesitantly.

She shoots me a knowing look. “What happened, Val? Why have you been so upset lately? It’s been a few weeks now, and you haven’t been yourself. Did you argue with Luca?”

I pull my hands out of hers and wrap them around myself. “No,” I lie. “He’s just my boss, Abuela. What are you thinking?”

She smiles at me. “You have worked for him for many years now, Chiquita. He is more than your boss. He’s like family, no? Perhaps more than that.”

My nails dig into my skin, and I shake my head even as my mind drifts back to the way he kissed me. It’s hard to explain just how betrayed I feel. To him, it was nothing but a quick hook-up, a way to control me when he thought I was veering off-track.

He has no idea it was the first time in years I let someone in. I trusted him with my body and let myself lose control. It was a foolish decision, and it’s one I profoundly regret. For a moment, he made the boundaries between us melt away, and he made me want things I know I can never have, only to remind me that I’m nothing to him. It’s everything my mother always warned me about, yet I still acted foolishly.

“No. He’s *just* my boss, nothing more. You should stop watching so many Telenovelas because you’re seeing things that aren’t there.”

“Am I?” she asks, her brows raised.

“Yes!”

She rises to her feet and starts to unpack the food she brought me, placing different containers on my coffee table leisurely. “If that’s true, then why have you been upset ever since you went to that wedding?”

I stare at her in surprise. How could she possibly have noticed that? “I’m not upset.”

She glances at me and shakes her head. “What is it then? Did the wedding make you think about settling down yourself? It’s about time, Val. By your age, I was already running after your mother.”

I groan and fall back on the sofa. “*Abuela*. I’m focusing on building my career. I just want to take care of Mom and you.”

She looks me square in the eye and pauses, a yoghurt container in her hand. “But who is going to take care of *you*, Princesa?”

I cross my arms and sigh. “I don’t need anyone to take care of me. I can take care of myself.”

She nods. “I know you can, Val. But sometimes it’s nice to rely on someone, even if you don’t have to. Sometimes it’s nice not to be alone. Life goes by fast, Val. When you get to my age, what will you have? What memories will you have made? Your work won’t keep you warm at night.” She hesitates, and then she sits down next to me. “That boss of yours? He cares about you, no?”

I think back to his harsh words and bite down on my lip. He genuinely thinks of me as a gold digger. I could see it in his eyes. He thought I was using him for his connections, that I’d get with Joshua just because he showed me some interest. He seemed to truly believe that if it hadn’t been him at that gazebo with me, I’d still have done what I did, like I’m some kind of whore eager for a rich man’s attention.

For years, I’ve done my best to stay away from those types of rumors, terrified I’d end up walking in my mother’s footsteps. I know better than anyone that he lives in a different world, and that if we ever got together, it’d end in tears for me. After all, I’ve gotten my heart broken in the exact same way once before. This time, there’s a lot more at stake than my useless heart — my livelihood is at risk.

“No, Abuela. He doesn’t care about me at all. Didn’t I tell you? That man is the devil. He’s heartless and emotionless. He cares about nothing and no one but himself.” I suppress the aching of my heart and straighten my spine.

I’m nothing but an employee to him, if that. His family might welcome me into their homes and hearts, but he never did, and he never will. I always knew we weren’t friends, but I thought… I suppose I thought too much. I never should’ve let things get as far as they did. I never should’ve kissed him back. I should’ve known he didn’t truly want me. He just wanted to control me.

She smiles ruefully and shakes her head. “You have been together for so many years. I suppose if there was anything there at all, something would have happened between you two. If you still hate him the way you did then,

then perhaps he is not the man I thought he was." She leans in and brushes my hair out of my face. "You should think about what makes you happy, Chiquita. This job? It no longer makes you happy. You haven't been smiling lately, and you're always stressed and overworked. Your mother and I are fine, Val. It's time for you to start living your life. You shouldn't always work so hard. You should find someone who will provide for you."

I grab her hands and entwine our fingers. "I *am* living, Abuelita. Don't worry about me, okay? I'm happy, and I still love my job. Everything is okay. I'm just having a couple of rough weeks, that's all."

She shakes her head. "You aren't happy, and you don't even realize it. I know what my granddaughter looks like when she's truly happy. This, my beautiful girl, isn't it."

She cups my cheek and sighs. "Just promise me you'll think about what I told you, okay? Think about what would make you truly happy, and promise me you'll chase whatever that is. Life is shorter than you think, mi niña."

I nod and wrap my hand over hers. "I promise."

Abuela pulls away and turns back toward the food she brought me. "Here," she tells me. "Have some of this—" she frowns as she stares at the container filled with Menudo in front of her. Her face pales as her expression goes blank. "Rosa," she says, calling me by my mother's name. "This? What is it called?"

Worry grips me as I wrap an arm around her. "Abuela?" I murmur, my heart racing.

She looks into my eyes and blinks. "Ah, Valentina? What is wrong, Princesa?"

What is going on? "Abuelita, have you been forgetting things lately?" I ask, my voice soft.

She laughs it off with a wave of her hand. "I'm old, Val. It happens."

That seemed like more than momentary forgetfulness. She was confused, and for a moment, she thought I was my mother. "How about we pay a visit to the doctor? It would make me feel so much better."

Her expression hardens and she shakes her head. "Sharks," she tells me. "They're all sharks. All they want is your money. Even if nothing is wrong, they'll find something to make us pay. I won't go."

I sigh and run a hand through my hair. "This is why we have health insurance, Abuela."

She shakes her head, a stubborn glint in her eyes. “You know they don’t cover everything, especially for me. I won’t go.”

I nod reluctantly. It’ll take me a while to convince her to go, but I’ll have to. “Okay, Abuelita.”

I rest my head against her shoulder, a hundred different thoughts fighting for dominance in my mind. I’m worried about my grandmother, and though I won’t admit it, I truly am still hurt over Luca. He always warned me not to overstep our professional boundaries, but somewhere along the way, I did, and now I have to find a way to undo that. I can’t risk losing my job, not when my family needs me so much. I need to do better.

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Chapter Ten

LUCA

"These three are my proposed targets," Valentina tells me as she places a document on my desk. "If we acquire these companies, we're positioned to expand the way you intend to."

No pink sticky note, yet again. I always hated them, but much to my surprise, I've come to miss them. She hasn't given me one since I kissed her, and it's surprising how bleak my world has become as a result of it. It's odd how it's the little things I miss the most.

I wish that were the only thing she's refused to give me, but it isn't. She's also been withholding her smiles and the mockery I always convinced myself I despised. Valentina no longer calls me out on things the way she used to, and she's become careful around me. She does her work without offering unsolicited opinions, and I miss her sharp wit.

“Tell me more about each of them,” I murmur, needing an excuse to keep her in my office, to hear her voice. We barely speak these days. More and more, she’s using the company’s instant messaging system instead of walking into my office the way she would have in the past, and when she does enter my office, it’s always brief.

“The document in front of you details everything you need to know,” she tells me, her voice clipped. It pains me to look at her. Having her standing so close and knowing I can’t touch her is the very definition of torment.

“My head hurts,” I lie. “Please summarize it for me.”

Why do I continue to torment her this way? I know better than anyone that this’ll only make her dislike me more, yet I can’t help myself. I want to keep her right here, where I can see her.

For a moment, I see annoyance flash through her eyes, and I pray she snaps at me and gives me the sass she used to. Dull disappointment washes over me when she nods and does as I ask, her voice as calm and professional as usual.

I never realized how much I’d come to love our partnership, because that’s exactly what it was. Valentina ceased being a mere employee years ago. If anything, she should have been my Chief Operating Officer, since that’s the exact role she performed, until recently.

“Stop,” I murmur. “Please, Valentina.”

Her eyes widen, and she looks caught off-guard. “Of course,” she says, nodding. She gestures toward the papers on my desk. “You can find the rest of the information right there.”

She steps back, and I shake my head. “No,” I tell her. “You know that’s not what I meant.”

For one single moment, the same loneliness I feel flashes through her eyes, and my heart starts to ache.

“I told you I’m sorry, Valentina. I’ll say it a thousand times if you want me to. What will it take for us to go back to the way we used to be?”

She looks away, her gaze unreadable. “I’m not sure what you mean,” she tells me, lying right to my face. “I believe I’ve been perfectly professional, and as far as I’m aware, I haven’t crossed any boundaries. Is there something you’re dissatisfied with? If you tell me what it is, I’ll improve it.”

My heart clenches painfully and I run a hand through my hair, my eyes falling closed. “You truly do drive me insane,” I whisper.

Her eyes flash with something that would’ve brought me to my knees if I wasn’t sitting. It was almost as though my words reminded her of that night. *Pain. Lust. Longing. Loneliness.* All of it blended together in those stunning hazel eyes of hers.

“We were a perfect team, Valentina. Are we really going to let one single night ruin that? How much longer will you treat me so coldly?”

She raises a trembling hand to her face and pushes her hair behind her ear. “I apologize,” she says, her voice soft. “It wasn’t my intention to treat you coldly, Luca. I was merely trying to act professional and abide by the boundaries you drew. I once forgot my place, and I don’t want to let that happen again. I got too comfortable, and it nearly cost me my job.” She pauses and crosses her arms, vulnerability filling those beautiful eyes of hers. “I don’t want you to feel like I’m using you, your family, or your network. I’m scared to do something that will make you misunderstand me, because the price for that is one I cannot pay. My family relies on me, Luca. I need this job, and I…”

Her eyes fall closed, torment taking over her expression. Fuck. *Fuck*. What have I done? She inhales shakily and forces a fake smile. It’s odd how even that now makes my heart race. It’s been months since she gave me one of those. I used to hate them, yet now I crave them. “I’m sorry,” she murmurs. “I’ll try my best to change my behavior.”

I look away and breathe in deeply. “No,” I murmur. “Forget I said anything.” I brush my hand through my hair and sigh. “Valentina, I won’t fire you so easily. I know what I said, and I’d give the world to take it back. I swear to you that the only way you’ll lose your job is if you leave me no other choice. I’ll never fire you over something trivial. I shouldn’t have let anger dictate my words, and I truly do apologize.”

She nods at me, but it’s clear she doesn’t believe me. I lost the small amount of trust she’d given me.

It’s been months, and at first, I thought we’d recover from this with time, but it looks like I was wrong. For years, I pushed her away and told her to remember her place, yet now that she’s actually heeding my warnings, I wish she’d defy me the way she always has.

Valentina walks away, leaving me staring after her. I always thought I hated her, so why does it feel like I lost my best friend? I took her for

granted and didn’t even realize it.

My office door opens suddenly, and my head snaps back up. My eyes widen in surprise when my grandmother walks in, disappointment washing over me. For a moment, I thought Valentina had walked back in.

I frown as I rise from my seat. While she’s technically the chairwoman of this company, my grandmother never comes to the office anymore.

“Grandma.” I walk around my desk and hug her tightly. “What are you doing here?”

She sighs and glances back through the glass wall, her eyes settling on Valentina seated behind her desk. She’s got her head down as she types away, her expression unreadable. “This is the only way I get to see her,” Grandma says, her tone filled with accusation. She looks back at me and raises her brows. “What did you do to her to make her stay away? She hasn’t come home for dinner in months. Even Sierra and Raven are worried. This goes beyond the petty feud you had with her. She’s staying away from her friends, from me — because of *you*.”

I look away, guilt rendering me speechless. How could I possibly tell my grandmother what happened between us?

“This can’t go on like this, Luca,” she warns me.

I nod and glance at Valentina. “I know,” I whisper.

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Chapter Eleven

LUCA

"Did your grandmother specify why she demanded my attendance tonight?" Valentina asks as she steps into the car. I blink in surprise and sneak a look at her. I've gotten so used to her icy silence whenever we're in the car together that her words startle me. Unless there's something to discuss with regard to work, she no longer speaks to me at all.

"No," I admit. "But the last time she called all of us together in this way was when she announced that Hannah broke off her engagement with Ares."

I feel her gaze on me, the silence between us filled with both of our worries and countless unspoken words. She knows as well as I do what my grandmother will be announcing tonight. If she wants Valentina there, whatever she has to say will be about me. Grandma has always included her

when it came to me, whether I like it or not. How would she respond if the announcement I'm expecting is truly what I think it is?

Valentina smiles as we walk into the dining room, catching me by surprise. I haven't seen her smile in so long, and it hits me right in the heart. I missed her more than she'll ever know.

"Rave!" Valentina calls before rushing over to my sister-in-law. It's clear they haven't seen each other in a while, when they used to be so close. Did I truly do that? Am I the reason she's been staying away from Sierra and Raven?

Raven hugs Valentina tightly before stepping back to check out her clothes. "I love this dress on you."

Valentina twirls around with the biggest grin on her face, showcasing the dress that Raven clearly designed for her. "I only wear the best of the best, and this designer? She tops them all."

So it's Raven I have to thank for my rapidly devolving sanity. Every fucking day, my mind wreaks havoc on me, imagining her on my desk, her clothes on the floor. I can't look at her without wanting her.

"Kids," Grandma shouts, her eyes moving over all of us. "As you may have guessed, I have an announcement to make."

The room falls silent, each of my siblings as tense as I am. The only exception is Ares, who has his arm wrapped around his wife, his expression unfazed.

Grandma smiles, her eyes briefly settling on Valentina, and then on me. My heart sinks before she even says my name. "Luca." My spine straightens, and I nod in resignation. I was hoping I was wrong, but deep down, I knew this meeting was about me all along. "Your engagement has been decided."

I feel my siblings' burning gazes on me, but somehow, it's Valentina I seek out. She stares at me wide-eyed, and for a moment, I'm convinced I see a flash of agony in her gaze.

I take a deep breath before speaking up. "Who is it?" I ask, resigned to my fate. I always knew I'd end up in an arranged marriage, so why do I feel so wronged? This is simply another business deal, and nothing more.

"Natalia Ivanov, daughter of Nikolai Ivanov and heiress to an oil empire. Oil is an industry we have yet to enter, and this will be our in."

My stomach drops. "Natalia Ivanov?" I repeat, my head snapping up. "The socialite? She's a spoiled, materialistic airhead."

Grandma throws me a chastising look. “She’s your soon-to-be fiancée. She’s a sweet girl, Luca. You’ll see.”

I stare at my grandmother for a moment, my heart heavy. The words she spoke at Ares and Raven’s wedding run through my mind, adding insult to injury.

You know that everything I do is for you and your siblings, right?

How could this possibly be in my best interests? Natalia is my polar opposite in every single way. I could never be with a woman like that. I can’t even imagine being in her presence for over ten minutes without being at risk of losing some brain cells. If this marriage had been arranged with me in mind, the one I’d be marrying would be someone like… *Valentina*. Calm, sophisticated, intelligent, and as cold as I am in daily life, yet blazing hot when I have my hands on her.

I shake my head and walk out of the room, needing a moment to myself to digest the bomb Grandma just dropped on me. I’m not sure what I was expecting, but this wasn’t it. I always thought I’d accept the news calmly, yet I can’t deny the aching of my heart.

Natalia Ivanov. Why her? Out of everyone it could have been, why did it have to be her? She’s bitchy, whiny, and fucking spoiled. I could never be friends with her, but somehow, I’m supposed to marry her?

I tense when I hear the telltale sound of Valentina’s heels clicking behind me. “Not now, Valentina,” I warn her without looking back.

For weeks, I’ve been craving her presence. Day after day, I found myself staring at her through the glass wall in my office, trying to think of ways to build a bridge over the hole I dug between us.

Had it been any other day, I’d have slowed my stride until she falls into step with me, but I can’t be near her tonight. Somehow, she’s the one person I can’t be around right now. Just seeing her fills me with regret I don’t have the heart to analyze.

I expected her to stop and turn around, but instead, the sound of her heels follows me all the way back to my condo. I walk in without holding the door open for her, but that doesn’t dissuade her. She simply unlocks it with her fingerprint and follows me in.

I sigh as I head to my liquor cabinet and pour myself a drink. “Make it two,” she says, her voice soft.

I look up at her, my eyes roaming over her beautiful face and settling on those lips I’ll never taste again. I tear my gaze away and make her a martini,

her favorite drink. For so long, I wondered how long it'd take for her to walk into my living room again. Never in a million years did I think that the day it finally happened would be a day like today.

She takes the glass from me with another one of those fake smiles of hers, and I grit my teeth. "I fucking hate it when you do that," I snap.

Her eyes widen a fraction. "Do what?" she asks carefully.

"Those blatantly insincere smiles. Fucking hate them."

She throws me another one of those smiles and raises her brows. "What? *This*? You don't like my customer service smile?"

I blink in confusion. "It's got a name?"

She laughs and sits down on my sofa. "You wouldn't understand," she tells me, "because you've never had to swallow down your dignity, but most of us common folk have a fake smile we've perfected."

I sit down next to her and sigh. She's so beautiful when she laughs. It's bittersweet that I've finally made her laugh, and it's on a night like tonight. "There's nothing common about you," I tell her, my voice soft. "Not a single thing."

She stares at me and shakes her head. "That might well be the nicest thing you've ever said to me."

I look into her eyes, a profound sense of loss washing over me. "I've said nice things to you before. I always compliment you on your work."

"Yes," she admits. "But you've never complimented me as a person. The only time you ever commented on my character—" she shakes her head and takes a sip of her drink instead. "It doesn't matter."

I turn to face her and take her drink out of her hand before placing it on the coffee table. "It does matter," I tell her. "I never intended to hurt you, Valentina. What I said to you at Raven and Ares's wedding was inappropriate and unacceptable, and I…" I bury my face in my hands for a moment and inhale deeply. "Valentina, I genuinely regret saying and doing what I did. I lost my temper and acted like a fucking fool. I didn't mean to hurt you, or to make you feel inferior in any way. You aren't. Hell, we both know I'm nothing without you."

She shakes her head and picks her drink back up. "Let's not talk about that, Luca," she says, shaking her head. "I promise you that it's fine. *We're* fine. Tell me instead how you are. Are you okay?"

I run a hand through my hair and inhale deeply. "I'm not sure. I didn't… I didn't see this coming."

Valentina takes another sip of her drink and nods. “Natalia is stunning,” she says, her voice soft. “The two of you will look great together.”

Bitterness settles deep in my stomach. I expected her to be somewhat hurt or jealous, but she isn’t.

“I know she’s young, and she seems somewhat immature, but that’s the beauty of marriage, isn’t it? You’ll grow together. The two of you will adapt to each other’s lives. It’ll all work out, I’m sure. Your grandmother would not have chosen her for you if that wasn’t the case.”

I should be grateful that she’s finally talking to me again, that the atmosphere between us is the same as it used to be, but I don’t want it to be. Not under these circumstances. I don’t want her to console me — I want her to be angry and jealous. I want her to lash out at me so I can pull her close and kiss her until she melts into me.

I look into her beautiful hazel eyes, my heart aching. Is no part of her bothered by the thought of me marrying Natalia?

I suppose not.

Why would she be?

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Chapter Twelve

VALENTINA

"Val?"

I look up, surprised to find Theo Miller, one of our fund managers, standing by my desk. "I'm sorry," I tell him. "I was lost in thought and didn't notice you standing there. God, I'm so sorry. What can I do for you?"

He smiles at me sweetly and shakes his head. It's clear he's been standing here a while, but I didn't even notice him. I need to pull myself together.

"There was an error in the report I sent you, so I printed a new copy for you ahead of the meeting. I hope I'm in time?"

I glance at my watch and nod. "We have about forty minutes left. I can't thank you enough for catching and correcting that so swiftly."

He shakes his head bashfully. “I never should have made a mistake in the first place. If the boss caught it, my job would’ve been at risk. You know what he’s like.”

I smile ruefully and nod, the mere thought of Luca bringing a frown to my face.

“Are you okay, Val?” Theo asks. “In all the years I’ve known you, an error like the one today has never slipped past you. If there’s anything I can do for you, I’m always here.”

I force a smile for him. “I just haven’t been sleeping well, and it’s impacting me during the day. Maybe I’m just a little overworked?”

Theo throws me an understanding smile, his gaze lingering on me for a moment before he walks away.

I haven’t been myself since Luca’s engagement announcement last week, and even my colleagues are starting to notice. I need to do better.

I keep trying to convince myself that I don’t care, and that I’m happy for him, when nothing could be further from the truth.

Every night, my mind has been tormenting me with images of him with Natalia, warping my memories until all I can see is him touching her the way he touched me.

When I close my eyes, I hear him whispering into her ear, telling her to look at no one but him. Just thinking of him holding Natalia that way, his eyes filled with the same desire he once felt for me… it fills me with unwarranted jealousy.

I inhale shakily and try my hardest to clear my mind, to no avail. Things have been different between us in recent days, more friendly in a way, yet more distant than ever before. It’s as though his engagement allowed us to finally put our argument behind us, and it’s bittersweet. I should be grateful for it, but instead it leaves me feeling lonely in a way I never have before.

My phone buzzes, and I glance at it reluctantly. Sierra and Raven have been texting me incessantly, wanting to discuss the engagement, but I’m not sure what to say. I never told them what happened between Luca and me, and the more time passes, the harder it becomes to speak up. Now I’m stuck having to act supportive and happy for him, when each mention of Natalia chips away at my tattered heart.

I run a hand through my hair and take a deep breath. Perhaps it isn’t jealousy. Maybe I’m just resistant to change. Luca and I work well together, and we have our routines. It’ll be strange to no longer be his date to work

events, or to go on business trips with Natalia accompanying us. Maybe that's just all it is.

I lean back in my chair and get to work. Staying busy is the only way for me to escape the thoughts I can't control. For as long as I can remember, I've chosen to lose myself in either education or work. I've always felt like those are the only things in my life that I'm fully in charge of, and it's no different today.

Just as I get in the zone, I'm snapped out of my workflow by the sound of heels clicking on the floor loudly. I look up to find Natalia walking toward me, her short blonde hair perfectly straight and her makeup as impeccable as always. I've seen her at a variety of events, and she always looks as though she walked straight out of a fashion magazine. She's exactly the kind of woman someone like Luca should marry. I shouldn't envy her, but a small part of me *does*.

Natalia glances at me and smiles smugly before heading straight for Luca's office instead of dropping by my desk first to see if he is available.

I jump to my feet, but she's faster than I am and storms into his office. No one has ever barged in like this before, and no one has ever entered Luca's office without my express permission — not even his family. I rush to follow her in, shock rendering me speechless. Luca looks up, his eyes widening when he sees Natalia.

"*Darling*," she says, drawing out the word. "You've been ignoring my text messages, so I had no choice but to come here myself."

He looks past her and frowns at me in confusion, but all I can do is send him an apologetic look. He rises from his seat and stares at her for a moment, his eyes lingering on her face. I wonder what he sees when he looks at her. She's insanely beautiful, and I have no doubt he's captivated. I've never seen Luca flustered before, and something about the way he looks at her… *hurts*.

"Natalia," he says, his voice warmer than I expected it to be. I thought he'd be annoyed at her for interrupting his workday without prior notice, but he seems pleasantly surprised to see her. Luca doesn't like deviations to his schedule, but I suppose his fiancée is an exception. That's how it should be, yet I don't want it to be.

I stand back as she walks around his desk and pauses right in front of him, a grin on her face. She's standing so close to him that she might as well press her body flush against his, and he isn't stepping back.

I bite down on my lip as I watch them together, my heart heavy. They look as perfect together as I thought they would. This is an image I'll have to get used to.

"What brings you here today?" he asks, his tone gentle.

"Can we talk?" She glances back at me and frowns. "About us? Our families will be announcing our engagement soon, but we've barely discussed it between the two of us."

He nods at her. "I suppose we should."

She throws me a condescending look and glances back at Luca. "Without your employees present," she adds. "I want her gone."

I tense and look at Luca, unsure what to do. It's irrational, and it's crazy, but I don't want to leave the two of them alone.

Luca glances at me and sends me a pleading look. "Valentina," he says, his voice soft. "I've got it from here. This is… a personal matter."

I stare at him for a moment, surprise stealing away my words. *A personal matter*. I don't remember the last time Luca asked me to leave a room. I don't think he ever has.

I involuntarily grit my teeth and nod politely before walking out, my hand trembling as I close the door behind me.

This is a ridiculous thing to be upset about, but I don't like the thought of the two of them alone in there. The way she looked at him and the gentleness he showed her… it was unexpected, but it shouldn't have been. Natalia is the one who will be his wife. No one but her is entitled to that version of him. What was I thinking? Did I truly think I was the only one he'd show that side of him to?

I'm restless as I sit behind my desk, my eyes trailing back to his closed office door every few minutes. Luca made his windows opaque, and it makes me uncomfortable that he wants privacy with her. I shouldn't care, and I hate that I do. One single kiss threw off our dynamics entirely. I took something I never should have, something that was never meant for me, and now I'm left wanting more of someone who can never be mine.

I tense when the door opens, and Natalia walks out with the biggest smile on her face. She pauses by my desk and looks me over for a moment. "I need dinner reservations for tonight," she says. "Two people. Eight o'clock. Somewhere with a nice view."

I blink in confusion. I ceased being a personal assistant years ago, and even if I was, I wouldn't take orders from her.

“Get it done,” she says, before walking out and leaving me speechless. I rise to my feet and walk into Luca’s office, my heart heavy. He’s standing by the window, his gaze averted.

“Luca,” I say hesitantly.

He turns to face me, his expression unreadable as I walk up to him. With each step I take, my heart aches a little more. A sense of dread settles in the pit of my stomach when my eyes zero in on the smudged lipstick at the corner of his lips.

I reach for him without thinking. Luca’s eyes widen, and I pause with my thumb a mere inch from his mouth. “Lipstick,” I murmur, my voice trembling ever so slightly.

He freezes and turns his back to me. How long was she even in his office? Ten minutes at most. Just a few days ago, he called her a spoiled materialistic airhead, yet now he’s kissing her?

“I… Natalia asked me to make a dinner reservation for you tonight.”

It rubs me the wrong way that she didn’t even introduce herself, and Luca didn’t bother introducing us either. It reminded me that in the end, I’m no one to Luca. I’m nothing more than another one of his employees, one that his grandmother has taken a liking to. For a little while, I forgot that.

He turns back to face me and runs a hand through his hair, the lipstick gone. “Yeah,” he says. “I said I’d take her out for dinner tonight. Pick something nice, please.”

I grit my teeth and look into his eyes. “You want me to make a reservation for your fiancée and you? You have a personal assistant for that kind of thing, Luca.” My job technically only involves monitoring his work schedule, company budgets, and other upper-level diplomacy tasks. Granted, I do a lot more than that, but I haven’t been asked to do such a basic task in years.

“Valentina,” he murmurs, his tone pleading. “Please. You’ve always taken the initiative to make reservations for me when I take either Sierra or Raven out for lunch. I need to make sure this is done right. It’s important.”

I look out the window and inhale shakily. “Is she that important to you already?” I ask, knowing that I shouldn’t.

Luca sighs. “She’s going to be my wife,” he simply says.

His wife. Hearing him say that shouldn’t hurt as much as it does.

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Chapter Thirteen

LUCA

I stare at my phone, willing myself to reply to Natalia's messages and failing to. I should be putting some effort into getting to know my fiancée, but instead I ignored her for a week straight, until she showed up at my office.

I can't see myself marrying her, but I have no choice. One way or another, I'll have to learn to live with her. I sigh and run a hand through my hair, my thoughts turning back to last night.

Sitting through that dinner with Natalia was much harder than I expected it to be. All night, all she talked about was fashion shows and holidays she wants to go on. She was somewhat concerned about what our wedding would be like, and whether it'd be extravagant enough for her

tastes, but she wasn't remotely interested in what a *marriage* between us would look like.

But then again, neither was I.

I inhale deeply and shake my head. It isn't like I didn't try at all. I tried asking her what her interests are, and I tried to explain my job to her, but it felt like I was talking to a brick wall. It was almost like we were having two different conversations. As far as I can tell, we have nothing in common, and she doesn't even remotely understand what I do for a living. She doesn't seem to be interested in finding out either.

It's never been that way with Valentina. We've had dinner together more times than I could possibly count, and each time, we're lost in conversation for hours on end. To be fair, often it's all about work, but still. It's always felt so effortless with her that the contrast between Natalia and her feels even greater.

What was Grandma thinking? How could she, even for a single second, believe that things could work out between Natalia and me? I can't see a future with her, and I'm worried we'll just end up making each other miserable.

A soft knock sounds on my door, and I look up to find Valentina walking in. My heart does this weird thing — it skips a beat despite the pain seeing her causes. Lately, I can no longer look at her without my heart feeling heavy. Would it have been easier if I never knew what she tastes like? If I never witnessed her losing control for me?

She's smiles at me politely, but today it doesn't even faze me. I drink her in, my eyes roaming over the white blouse she's wearing, down to her red pencil skirt and matching high heels. Every inch of her is beautiful, in a completely understated way. Her beauty is real and fucking awe-inspiring. I could stare at her for hours and never tire of it, yet I can't say the same about the woman I'm supposed to marry.

There's only one way to describe how Valentina makes me feel, standing in front of my desk, her long hair falling over her chest all the way down to her waist. *Helpless*. She makes me feel fucking helpless. It's an emotion I'm not overly familiar with, yet she elicits it in me.

Valentina places a document on my desk, but I can't focus on what she's telling me. My mind is insistent on torturing me with thoughts of her. All night, as I sat opposite my fiancée, I thought of her. Every word that left Natalia's mouth reminded me of Valentina.

“Luca?”

I blink, snapped out of my thoughts. “Valentina,” I murmur, her name feeling foreign on my lips. How could I have been thinking about Valentina when I should be focusing on Natalia? Guilt hits me hard, and I look away. I need to remember that we can’t be more than co-workers — especially considering the way things were after I kissed her. I grit my teeth and force a smile onto my face. “Can you please order me some flowers?” I ask, my voice soft, defeated. “Please send Natalia a hundred roses.”

Valentina’s eyes widen a fraction, something I can’t quite identify flashing through them. She stares at me, her lips falling open as though she’s about to speak, but then she clamps them shut. She turns her head and looks out the window for a moment, shielding her expression from me.

Something about her demeanor increases the aching of my heart. Why is it that everything feels changed between us when nothing has?

“Luca,” she repeats, her tone different. She looks back at me, and my stomach drops. I’ve never seen her look at me that way before. Regret and pain mix in those gorgeous hazel eyes of hers, nearly bringing me to my knees. “I quit.”

I blink in confusion, falling silent for a moment, certain I misheard her. “You… you *what*?”

She inhales deeply and tries to force a smile to her face, but this time, she fails. “I’m resigning. Thank you for everything you’ve taught me, and for your continued guidance. I know you were forced to work with me, and you’ve never enjoyed it, but I appreciate every second I’ve spent with you, nonetheless. I learned more than you could ever imagine, and thanks to you, I’ve grown in ways I didn’t think I could.”

I rise to my feet and place my hands on my desk, leaning forward to face her. “No,” I tell her.

She tries to smile again and inhales shakily before reaching for something in the folder she’s holding. She slides a piece of paper toward me, and I stare at it in disbelief. A resignation letter.

I grab it with trembling hands and read it over, certain there must be some kind of misunderstanding.

“No,” I repeat. “I’m not letting you go.” I clench my jaw as I rip her resignation letter apart, letting the pieces fall to my desk.

She looks at me, her expression carefully blank. “HR will be receiving a digital copy shortly, and so will you.”

“Valentina,” I plead. “You can’t do this. Why… why would you leave me?”

She looks down and shakes her head. “Ultimately, this is just a job, and I’m just another one of your employees. I’ve outgrown this position, Luca. You know that as well as I do.”

She takes a step back, and at last, she manages to force one of her fake smiles for me. She’s right, of course. She could be doing my job if she truly wanted to. She could be the CEO of Windsor Finance, and she’d do a magnificent job. The moment our competitors find out she’s looking for a new job, they’ll come after her. Rightfully so.

“Please,” I murmur. I’ve never pleaded with anyone, but I’ll go down on my knees for her if that’ll make her stay.

Her eyes widen, and she pauses. I see her hesitate, but then she steels her spine and shakes her head. “No,” she whispers. “I’m sorry.”

I watch her as she walks out of my office, leaving my heart feeling an awful lot like the pieces of paper scattered across my desk — torn apart and discarded.

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Chapter Fourteen

VALENTINA

I pause outside of Abuela's home and stare up at it, feeling lost. I've never been an impulsive person. Every single thing I do is well thought out. My steps are measured and calculated. For as long as I can remember, I've played the long game.

Even when I was younger, I never dreamed too big. The one time I did, reality quickly came calling, reminding me that people like me don't get to have carefree college years filled with fun and parties. When I close my eyes, I can still see my mother's expression as she told me that she and Abuela had started eating more canned foods than before, because the loss of my part-time income was too hard to bear.

I don't know if she said it knowing that the guilt would tear me apart, or whether she simply wanted me to be aware of the reality they faced while I

pursued my dream of attending college. Either way, the moment my mother was in an accident, I knew I had to come back home. My mounting student debt combined with the sustained loss of income for my family shattered my dreams, and I haven't dared dream too big ever since.

I've always known that providing for my family would be a burden I'd carry, and I've done it without a single complaint. I know that I don't have the luxury of acting impulsively when my mother and grandmother rely on me.

Yet that's exactly what I did. I quit my job without thinking. The worst part is that I don't regret it. I don't think I've felt quite this free in a long time, but how long will that last? How long will it take for reality to come knocking on my door all over again?

I have enough savings to see me through the next six months, but then what? I've worked for Windsor Finance since I was twenty, and I have no other work experience whatsoever. Both the car I use and the apartment I live in are owned by the company too. Walking away from my job means walking away from life as I know it.

Worry trickles down my spine, and I inhale shakily as I walk into the house. I breathe in deeply, the scent of Fabuloso oddly putting me at ease. Abuela must have cleaned the house today.

I pause in the hallway and take a moment to collect my thoughts. I'm not sure how to explain my actions to Mom or Abuela, and I'm scared to find disappointment and concern in their eyes when I finally muster up my courage.

"What's wrong, Rosa?" Abuela asks when I walk into the living room.

I pause and blink in confusion. "Abuelita?"

She frowns and shakes her head. "Ah, Val," she corrects herself. "You look so much like your mother sometimes."

I sit down next to her and drop my head to her shoulder, taking comfort in her embrace. She holds me tightly and presses a kiss on top of my head, but all it does is worry me further.

Abuela already had a lot of pre-existing conditions that the insurance I was finally able to afford won't cover, and she isn't getting any younger. She's been refusing to get a check-up, but eventually, I'll convince her to go. What if she truly does need more medication?

What was I thinking, quitting a well-paid job? And what for? I've thought it over countless times, but objectively speaking, there was no real

reason for me to resign. Luca doesn't treat me badly, and he pays well. Thing had finally gone back to the way they used to be between us too. I shouldn't have done what I did, yet I can't make myself stay either.

"Abuela," I whisper, my voice trembling. "I quit my job today."

She doesn't respond but continues to stroke my hair, her touch soothing. "Luca," she says hesitantly. "Did he get engaged?"

I sit up and turn to face her, surprised. "How did you know? Has it been announced by the press already?"

Abuela smiles tenderly and shakes her head. "No. I just had a feeling. When you told me about his brother and the way he got married, I had a feeling this would happen."

I cross my arms and look away. "That has nothing to do with me quitting."

Abuela nods. "Of course," she says, her voice soft. "But still, it is good for you to build a life of your own."

"Did you quit, or did he fire you once he got engaged?" I look up at the sound of my mother's voice. She's standing in the doorway, a forlorn expression on her face.

"I quit, Mom. Luca getting engaged had nothing to do with it."

She frowns at me and crosses her arms. "Why else would you have quit such a good job?" she asks, a hint of anger flashing through her eyes. "I should've known when that man gave you a house to live in, like you're some kind of mistress. Nothing good could've come from associating with that family. I never should've let you take that job in the first place. Tell me, Val. Did you think he'd fall in love with you eventually? Tell me you weren't that foolish. Men like him will always want women from their own social circles. The difference between you two is too great. Tell me that you didn't risk your job and his respect for some cheap fling that he won't even remember."

I flinch and lower my gaze. "I quit because I felt like there was no further career progression at Windsor Finance, and I wanted a new challenge." It isn't entirely true, but that did factor into my decision. I'd gotten comfortable working with Luca, and because of it, I'd compromised my own growth just so I could stay by his side. That *cheap fling*, as my mother would call it, was the best thing that could have happened to me in that regard. It helped me see that I'm nothing but an asset to him, a resource. It's been years, and he still doesn't trust me fully, nor does he

respect me the way I thought he did. I'm someone he feels he can order around carelessly, someone he wouldn't even bother introducing to his fiancée.

"I hope that's true, Val. Don't make the same mistake I made. Perhaps it's good that you quit your job, after all. He'll have a wife soon, and she won't like how close you two are." She runs a hand through her hair and looks away. "I don't want you to be taken for granted, and eventually abandoned, just like I was. You cannot grow old with him, Val. When you age, and you aren't as good at your job as you used to be, he'll replace you. It's best to walk away before that happens. It'll be good for you to gain more work experience before it's too late. There would never be a future for you with him, not long-term. You wouldn't survive in his world like that, and he'd look down on you. You could never be his equal."

Tears burn in my eyes as I stare at the wall. "Do you think I don't know that?" I ask, my voice breaking. I came home because I needed some consolation, but instead, all that awaited me was bitterness and scorn.

"*Rosa*," Abuela warns, but I shake my head and rise to my feet.

"Forget it," I mutter. "I'm going home."

"Valentina!" Abuela calls. "*This* is your home."

I glance back at Abuela when I reach the doorway. "I wish it was," I tell her, before walking out.

Heartache chases me all the way home, and by the time I walk into my apartment, I'm trembling, unshed tears filling my eyes.

"Val?"

I walk into my living room to find Sierra and Raven sitting on the floor in front of the TV, a bottle of wine and a tub of ice cream laid out in front of them. The mere sight of them has me losing it, and I burst into tears, sobs tearing through my throat as I sink down to my knees, my hands covering my face.

The tears fall harder when I feel their arms wrap around me, as though they're trying with all their might to keep me together when all I want to do is self-destruct.

"H-how did y-you know?" I stammer. "How did you know I… I… n-needed you?"

Sierra presses a kiss on top of my head, and Raven hugs me tighter, my face pressed against her neck. "Of course we knew," Raven murmurs.

They both sit on the floor with me like that, no questions asked, no sermons given. They merely give me the unconditional support I need while accepting that I can’t articulate my pain. I pray that I don’t lose them in the aftermath of everything that is to come.

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Chapter Fifteen

LUCA

I stare out the large windows in my office, my mind drifting back to the day Valentina was hired. She was so young, and she had little to no work experience. She didn't even have a degree — she was a college dropout.

I couldn't understand why my grandmother would hire someone like her, and even less so, why she'd place her beside *me*. I chalked it up to nepotism and set out to get her fired, but nothing I did ever fazed her.

Each task I gave her that should've been too hard for her to do was executed perfectly. She learned faster and worked harder than anyone else in the firm — including me. It only took her a year to become indispensable to me.

I've come to rely on her in a way I would never rely on anyone else, and I've compensated her for it handsomely. Whatever she needed, I've

provided. She once complained it took her too long to travel to the office from home, so I bought her an apartment near here. When she arrived at work one day, besmirched by the rain, I bought her a car.

I've done everything within my power to keep her happy, to show her how much I value her work. So why did she quit? That question has kept me up all night, and I came up blank.

I tap my finger on my desk as I stare at my pocket watch.

Three.

Two.

One.

The door to my office opens, and Valentina walks in. Her routines are like clockwork. She never deviates. So why now? Why so suddenly?

The mere sight of her has me straightening in my seat. My eyes trail over her body, taking in the red dress she's wearing. It's perfectly appropriate for the office, yet the way it wraps around her curves is sinful. Valentina is clearly dressed for battle today. She only ever wears red on special occasions, or when she has a difficult workday ahead of her. The fact that she was wearing a red skirt when she handed in her notice should've been a dead giveaway.

She smiles politely and places today's schedule in front of me, one of her pink sticky notes on top, to highlight the most important aspects. It's odd how much joy they bring me when they used to irritate me endlessly. "We have two investor meetings today," she tells me, but I hold my hand up, cutting her off.

"Look at this first." I push a document toward her, and she picks it up with a frown on her face.

"What is this?"

"New contract terms. I'll double your salary, and I'll increase your holiday allowance. I'm also adding in one all-inclusive holiday every year, as well as a new car and a new house. It is, however, up for negotiation. If there's anything else you want, I'd love to hear it."

She stares at me and shakes her head. "I appreciate the offer," she says, smiling tightly. "But I must respectfully decline."

I blink in confusion. *Decline*? What does she mean, she's declining my offer? "What is it you want, Valentina?"

She stares at me for a moment, her gaze pensive. "Nothing," she says, her voice soft. "I don't want anything from you."

I look into her eyes, entirely at a loss. “I’m not letting you go,” I warn her. “Everything has a price.”

She tilts her head, and then she laughs, not an ounce of humor in her voice. “*I don’t*,” she tells me. “You can’t buy me, Luca. Nothing you can offer me will make me stay.”

I rise from my seat and place my palms on my desk as I lean in. “Tell me why you’re leaving.” If I can figure out why she wants to leave, I can fix it.

She hesitates for a moment, and I walk around my desk, pausing in front of her. Valentina looks up at me, but it isn’t me she’s seeing. She seems lost in thought.

“Valentina.” My voice is soft and gentle, almost as though I’m scared to speak too loudly, to do anything that might increase the distance between us.

Her eyes settle on mine, and it hits me square in the chest. “Do you want the truth?”

I nod.

“I just turned twenty-nine, Luca. In all the years we’ve worked together, I’ve never made any friends that aren’t in any way related to you. Do you know why?”

She doesn’t give me a chance to answer.

“Because my job had to take precedent over everything else in my life if I wanted to excel at work. I worked day and night, through weekends and holidays, to the point that I don’t even know who I am anymore. I don’t know what my dreams are, or what I’m doing with my life. I don’t want to wake up one day and realize that my entire life is empty. Besides, like I said, I’m done growing in this company. The job role I want next isn’t one you can give me.”

I place my hands on her shoulders and hold on to her tightly, all the while wishing I could hold her closer. “Valentina, maybe all you need is a break. Why don’t I just book you a holiday? I can get the private jet ready for you within hours. Just tell me where you want to go, and I’ll arrange it. Maybe you’re just burned out, and I’ve just asked too much of you. I can decrease your hours and workload. I can hire more staff.”

She takes a step away from me, and my arms fall to my side. “No,” she says decisively. “A holiday won’t solve the underlying problem, Luca, and you know it. I do need a break, but not the kind you’re thinking of. I need a

clean break. A new start. A chance to find my own happiness. I don't know what's next for me, but I know it's far away from here, from you."

Panic surges within me, and I take a step toward her, until I've got her trapped against my desk. This is all because I touched her when I never should have. I changed things between us, and I can never undo that. "Your own happiness?" I ask. "What does that even mean? Does working for me make you unhappy?" I wrap my hand around the back of my neck to keep from touching her and inhale deeply. "Tell me what challenge you want, and I'll make it happen. I'll buy you a company to manage on my behalf. How about that?"

She sighs. "No. I don't want to work with you anymore, Luca. I don't know how to explain myself any clearer than that."

I stare into her beautiful eyes, noting the frustration and pain mingling together. I don't understand. Why the fuck is she leaving me when I'm offering her the world?

Valentina smiles and hands me a piece of paper. "My notice period is six months. That's enough time for us to find someone to replace me, and for me to train them. This is a list of candidates I've hand selected. If you let me know which of them you prefer, I'll invite them over and start the interview process."

I stare at the document in my hand and grit my teeth as I crumble it into a ball before letting it drop to the floor. Valentina grins at me and pulls another identical copy out of her trusty leather folder. She doesn't hand it to me this time. Instead, she places it on my desk.

"Look over the candidates," she tells me, her voice soft. "I *will be* leaving, and you *will* need someone to replace me."

She walks away, her long hair swaying with each step. I'm letting her leave my office today, but she's crazy if she thinks I'll let her walk out of my life so easily.

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Chapter Sixteen

VALENTINA

My hands tremble as I read over the article The Herald published about Luca and Natalia, announcing their engagement. They were captured having dinner together, and the way he looks at her fills me with equal parts longing and heartache. I know I'm not in love with Luca, but there's something between us that wasn't there before. I suppose what hurts the most is the thought of everything that could have been, and everything that was. The history between us will start to fade day by day, until it becomes a distant memory, just like my mother said it would.

I inhale shakily as I stare at the list of candidates I compiled. One of them will end up taking over my job, becoming Luca's closest aide. If I do this well, he won't even miss me. The right person will make it so that he barely notices my absence.

It’s not me he’s worried about losing. It’s the workflow we’ve created. It won’t be easy, but six months should be enough time to train someone to do everything I currently do for him. No one is irreplaceable in this world — least of all me.

I sigh as I spread out the documents on my living room floor. I could just interview all of them, but I don’t think we have time for that. I need to select my top ten applicants, because I know Luca won’t.

I’ve just about got it narrowed down to twenty applicants when my doorbell rings. I frown in confusion as I head to the door. Sierra or Raven would’ve let me know if they’re coming over, and they always let themselves in once they get here. Neither my mother nor grandmother would come here, because they’d just ask me to go to them.

My eyes widen when I see Luca on the security screen. His cheeks are flushed, and he looks drunk. “Valentina?” he calls through the intercom. What is he doing here? Today is his monthly poker night with his brothers, and he’s never missed it before. His family is everything to him. There’s been more than one occasion when he’s cut business trips short just so he could be back in time for it, so why is he *here* tonight?

I’m nervous as I let him in, uncertain what to make of this and appalled at the way my heart races.

“*Valentina*,” he says as he leans in my doorway. He grins at me, and my heart skips a beat. He looks so unguarded. I don’t think I’ve ever seen him smile at me that way.

“You’re drunk,” I murmur as he stumbles into my apartment.

Luca looks around, his curiosity apparent. “It’s nicer than I remember.”

“What is? My home?”

He nods, and I frown.

“But you’ve never been here before.”

He turns to face me and reaches for me. His index finger traces over the side of my face for a moment, before he pushes my hair out of the way. “Of course I have,” he tells me. “Do you have any idea how many apartments I viewed before I bought you this one?”

I blink in confusion. “What?”

He lets his hand fall away and sighs. “No, of course you don’t,” he whispers. “There’s so much you don’t know.”

“Luca,” I say hesitantly. “What are you doing here?”

He stares at me like I'm a mirage, like I could disappear at any second. "I don't know," he admits. He raises his hand and grabs a strand of my hair. "I always used to wonder what your hair would feel like, and then I found out, so I started to wonder what it would look like spread over my pillows. It kills me that I'll never know."

He lets go of my hair and lets his fingers trail over my jaw, before moving down to my throat, his eyes never leaving mine as his hand slips around the back of my neck. Luca tilts my face up toward his, and my breath catches.

"Luca, you're drunk. You aren't thinking clearly. I'll call your driver, okay?"

He shakes his head. "My thoughts have never been clearer than they are tonight. Tell me, Valentina. Are you leaving me for another man?"

My eyes widen. "I… *what*?"

He takes a step closer, until his body is pressed against mine. "Who is it?"

I shake my head. "Luca, there isn't anyone, but even if there was, how is that any of your business? You're engaged."

His hands wrap around my waist, and before I realize what he's doing, he's lifted me into his arms and up against the wall. My legs instinctively wrap around his hips to hold myself up, and he groans, his forehead falling against mine. Our positions are the same as they were that night, and I wonder if he realizes it.

"I don't even remember her fucking name," he tells me. "I *can't*, because all of my thoughts are filled with *you*."

I grit my teeth and bury a hand in his hair, throwing caution to the wind. "That's bullshit," I snap. "I saw the lipstick on your face. I'm the one who made your dinner reservation, the one who sent her roses. What game are you playing, Luca? Don't even dream of messing with my emotions just because you've run out of other options to control me with."

He looks into my eyes, his gaze dropping to my lips for a moment. "I never kissed her," he tells me. "Not once. I can't even imagine it. The lipstick… I'm not sure what she was trying to do. I think she was trying to kiss my cheek? I don't know, Valentina. I stepped away, but I couldn't avoid her entirely."

I stare at him, unsure what to believe, unsure why he's attempting to explain at all. "I don't care," I whisper. "I don't care what you do with your

fiancée. It has nothing to do with me."

His grip on my waist tightens for a moment before he moves his hands up, until they're resting right below my breasts. "It has everything to do with you," he murmurs. "You didn't decide to leave me until that girl walked into my life. Tell me the truth, Valentina. Would you have quit your job if that engagement hadn't been forced on me?"

I'm at a loss for words and look away, unable to hold his gaze.

Luca sighs and leans in to rest his head on my shoulder, his lips pressed against my neck. "You wouldn't have," he whispers, before kissing my neck softly.

A soft gasp escapes my lips, and he repositions me against him, letting me feel how hard he is. "Valentina," he whispers. "*Please*. Please don't leave me."

I close my eyes and will myself to get it together. He might be drunk, but I'm not. This can't go any further. I push against his chest and unwrap my legs, forcing him to let me go. He does so reluctantly, keeping his arms wrapped around me even when my feet hit the floor.

"Let go," I tell him. "What do you think you're doing, Luca? Do you truly think I don't realize what you're doing? You failed to bribe me, so now you're trying to emotionally manipulate me?"

He takes a step away from me, hurt flashing through his eyes. "I would never do that to you, Valentina."

"Then what is this? You know as well as I do that you'll have to marry Natalia before the year is over. There's nothing you can do or say that would change that. So, this? How is this fair to me? Why now? Can you truly look me in the eye and tell me that you aren't doing this in an attempt to bend me to your will?"

Luca runs a hand through his hair and looks up at the ceiling. He looks as lost as I feel. Is any of this real? For years, he treated me with near disdain. I've always just been an employee to him, and nothing more. Part of me wants his desire to be real, but I've known Luca long enough to know it can't be. He's a control freak, and I'm not walking the road he paved for me. He's trying to get me back on track, and he'll stoop to whatever means necessary.

"I need you to leave. I'll let this go on account of our history. Tomorrow morning, we're going to pretend this didn't happen, and in six months,

you’re going to let me go. Nothing you do or say will change my mind, Luca. I’m done being your pawn.”

I walk to the door and hold it open for him. He sighs and follows me reluctantly. I didn’t think he’d have anything left to say, but he leans against the doorway and looks into my eyes, his gaze unfocused. “You were never a pawn,” he says, his voice soft. “You were always my queen. Everyone knew it but you.”

Then he walks out, leaving both my thoughts and my heart in disarray.

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Chapter Seventeen

LUCA

I lean back in my chair, my eyes on Valentina through the glass walls that surround my office. Fragments of last night flash through my mind as my head throbs painfully. I can't remember the last time I got truly wasted. I hate losing control, yet that's exactly what I did last night.

What the fuck did I do? What the fuck was I thinking? It's all fucking Zane and Ares's fault. They should've kept me at poker night, but instead, they filled my head with thoughts about Valentina and some other man that she'd end up marrying. The fuckers even called me a driver to take me to her place. They should've known better, and the same goes for me.

Valentina has been acting normal all morning, and she even handed me some paracetamol and water with one of those annoying smiles on her face and a sweet sticky note, yet I can't shake the feeling that I did some

irreparable damage to our relationship. If I had a chance to retain her at all, I definitely blew it last night.

I hesitate for a moment before pressing one of the buttons on my desk phone. I watch as she rises from her seat, my eyes roaming over the tight red dress she's wearing today. There are no big deals that we're negotiating today, and she hasn't confronted me about last night. If she was going to, she would've done it already.

So why?

Why is she wearing red?

"You called for me?" she asks, her face perfectly expressionless.

I rise from my seat and walk around my desk to lean against it. She stands in front of me, her gaze unwavering.

"We need to talk."

She raises a brow and nods. "What is it you'd like to discuss?"

I study her face for a moment. "I'd like to apologize for the way I behaved last night. I never should've gotten as drunk as I did, and I certainly never should've shown up at your house in that state."

She looks into my eyes as though she's searching for a hint of insincerity, but then she nods. "That's quite alright," she tells me. "We've all had our fair share of drunken moments. You're not exempt from them."

I raise my brow and stare at her, confused. That's it? That's all she has to say? "I meant it," I tell her, my voice soft. "I won't let you go."

Valentina crosses her arms and stares me down. "Why? Why do you insist on tying me to this job? It's not unnatural to be resistant to change, Luca, but you'll be fine. I'm not walking away abruptly. I'll find and train a replacement."

I clench my jaw and reach for her, wrapping a strand of her hair around my finger. "No one could ever replace you, Valentina. No one knows me the way you do. I'd be a fool if I ever let you go. Windsor Finance would never sustain the loss of you. *I wouldn't.*"

I see her waver and hold my breath for a moment, scared to say anything that'll ruin the progress I know I've made with her. "Luca," she whispers, her gaze softening. "I…"

The moment breaks when my office door opens, and I pull my hand away, letting Valentina's hair slip through my fingers. I look up with barely restrained anger, only to find my sister-in-law grinning back at me.

“Raven,” I say, my anger draining away. She might be my brother’s wife, but she’s always been like a sister to me. Even now, I can’t find it in me to be annoyed with her.

“There you are,” she says, her gaze settling on Valentina. “You forgot this.” She holds up a bag with her brand’s logo on it, and I frown. “These shoes go with the dress you’re wearing. I want you to look *perfect* on your date tonight.”

Valentina’s eyes widen, and I tense, my stomach dropping. “*Date*?” I repeat, my tone carrying a hint of danger. “What fucking date?”

Valentina turns toward Raven with a smile, clearly intent on walking toward her, but I wrap my hand around her wrist and keep her in place. I pull her back toward me, and she stumbles, falling into my arms.

“Luca!” she admonishes as she straightens and pushes away from me.

“You’re going on a fucking date?” I ask, my voice simmering with anger. She looks away, but I grab her chin and turn her face back toward mine. “Answer me.”

“It’s a private matter,” she snaps, instantly making me regret the words I uttered when Natalia came to my office.

“Who is it?”

She grits her teeth and glares at me. “That’s none of your concern.”

“You don’t have time to go on a date tonight,” I tell her, racking my brain to come up with an excuse. “I need you to double check the information we’re supplying to the auditors.”

“I’ve already done that.”

“The budgets for our next quarter need to be adjusted.”

“I’ve already finalized those and had meetings which each department head to discuss them.”

I pause. “I need detailed meeting minutes for every single meeting we’ve attended this week.”

She raises her brow. “I’ve already emailed them to you.”

Frustration crawls up my spine. Why the fuck is she so good at her job? “I want to see the plans for Salazar Finance’s IPO.”

Valentina frowns. “That isn’t due until next month.”

“I want it now.” That’s at least a week’s worth of work. She’ll have to work overtime to get that done, making it impossible to go on her date.

She crosses her arms and stares at me for a moment. “Very well,” she says hesitantly. “I suppose you’re in luck. I’ve already drafted the plan. I’ll

put the finishing touches on it and email it over within an hour."

"*W-what*?" I stammer.

She smiles at me in that polite way I despise. "Now, if that's all, I'll go ahead and grab some coffee with Raven before I get back to work."

She turns and walks away, her stride confident. What the fuck is happening? In all the years we've worked together, I've never once heard of her dating anyone.

The door closes behind her, and I stare at it for a moment, my thoughts reeling. What the fuck do I do? I can't keep her from going on that date.

I hesitate for a moment before picking up my phone and calling our Head of Security, Silas Sinclair. He picks up almost instantly.

"Windsor," he says, his tone as monotone as it always is. I've never seen him act animated around anyone but his wife. I have no idea what Alanna sees in that wooden block of a human.

"Silas." I hesitate for a moment. "I need you to find out where Valentina is going tonight, and with *who*."

He falls silent for a moment. "Have you tried asking her?"

I hate this guy. He's so fucking irritating, but he's the best at what he does. "Of course I've fucking tried, Sinclair. She wouldn't tell me."

He sighs, clearly irritated by my request. "Have you considered that it might just be none of your goddamn business what Val does in her private time? Aren't you engaged, anyway? Congrats, by the way."

I clench my jaw. "I don't pay you to question me."

"You don't pay me at all," he replies. "Your grandmother does."

I run a hand through my hair and stare up at my ceiling. I finally understand why Ares hates Silas so much. "I need a name and a location."

Silas sighs. "My wife isn't going to like this. She's friends with Val, and you know it. Don't do anything fucking weird. If you do, and Alanna finds out, I'll never hear the end of it."

This motherfucker. He has no loyalty to anyone but his wife. He's as rich as I am, so he can't be bought either. I hate people I can't control, and Silas Sinclair is a wildcard.

"The restaurant is called Marsella. She's going on a date with Theodore Miller."

I end the call with barely restrained fury. *Theo Miller.* One of our portfolio managers? I'll be damned. Fucking asshole.

I sit back in my chair and stare at my computer, hesitating for a split second before sending an email to HR. I smile as I read back the contents.

Effective immediately, I'm enforcing a no-fraternization rule. Dating within the company is expressly prohibited and will be grounds for immediate termination. Please send out a company-wide email.

Valentina might be willing to walk away from her job, but Theo won't.

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Chapter Eighteen

VALENTINA

“I didn’t think you’d ever say yes,” Theo says, snapping me out of my thoughts. What’s wrong with me? From the moment we sat down, all I’ve done is think about Luca.

The way he acted when he first heard about me going on a date surprised me, but he was quiet the rest of the day. Perhaps he was just caught off-guard, and he didn’t care nearly as much as I thought he did. That should make me feel far more relieved than it does, and it should *not* be filling me with dull disappointment.

Theo picked me up at my desk, and I was so certain Luca would do or say something, but he didn’t. Instead, he merely glanced at us from his office before refocusing on his work, as though he couldn’t care less.

“Why wouldn’t I?”

Theo smirks and leans in. “You don’t know what everyone in the office calls you, do you?”

I chuckle and rest my elbow on the table, my fist supporting my chin as I lean into him. “*The Ice Queen?*”

His eyes widen a little, and then he shakes his head, soft laughter escaping his lips. “I should’ve known better. There’s nothing happening in the company that you don’t know about, is there?”

I grin at him. “It’s kind of my job to know everything.”

He stares at me, a hint of disbelief in his eyes, almost as though he genuinely can’t believe I’m sitting opposite him. “You have no idea how long I’ve wanted to ask you out. I… I just wasn’t sure. I’d never seen you date anyone, and you never discuss your personal life with your colleagues. I’ve only ever seen you with the boss, so I thought that perhaps you two…” He runs a hand through his hair and shakes his head. “But then we all got the company memo about him getting engaged and you seemed completely fine, so I realized I was wrong. I wish I’d mustered up the courage to ask you out sooner.”

My smile freezes, and I look away for a moment. “Luca and I have never dated.”

Theo rubs his neck awkwardly and stares down at his plate. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to imply anything. I just… it took me so long to ask you out, and now that we’re here, I’m blowing it.”

I chuckle and shake my head. “Not at all.”

He clasps his hands and smiles brightly. “Let’s just not talk about work at all. Tell me about your favorite hobbies. I want to know what you’re like outside of work. Who is the real Valentina Diaz?”

My favorite hobbies? I blink in confusion. I’m always working. I can’t even think of anything I do to relax, other than watching TV. *Hobbies?* I don’t have any.

“She loves to cook and religiously follows food YouTube channels. She prefers those over cooking shows. She’s weirdly into miniature cooking, too.” My head snaps up, shock rendering me speechless when I find Luca standing next to our table. “Though she mocks my sister constantly, she reads every smutty romance recommendation Sierra gives her, and she’s recently gotten into audiobooks too. She’ll listen to them with a straight face while at work, thinking I don’t realize what she’s up to. Other than that, she’s obsessed with Sudokus. She has a stack of Sudoku books in her

desk drawer, and every time I give her a hard time or make her work overtime, she angrily solves one, cursing me out the entire time."

Theo stares at Luca for a moment, neither of us sure what to do. "Boss," he says eventually. "You… w-what are you doing here?"

I nod, equally confused, though deep down, there's something more. Something I can't quite define. It's a vague sense of victory and relief. Perhaps he cared about me going on a date after all.

Luca pulls up a chair and places it at our table without an ounce of shame. "You're ever so efficient," he tells me, before turning to Theo. "And so are you, Miller. If you keep this up, I may actually have to give you a raise. How did you know we recently acquired this restaurant chain?" His gaze moves between the two of us, pure fury dancing in his eyes. "I can't tell you how happy I am to see how proactive you both are. I'd been meaning to come test out this place. What a coincidence." His tone is perfectly emotionless, and he's obviously being sarcastic.

"Or am I mistaken? This can't be a date, can it? Did you miss the memo sent out today? As of today, there's a no-fraternization rule in effect. Dating within the company is prohibited." He looks at Theo then and smiles. "You wouldn't want to lose your job, would you?"

"What are you talking about?" I ask, my voice an octave higher than I intended it to be. Of course I saw the memo, but I had every intention of ignoring it. I didn't expect him to show up here today. "I… what acquisition?" Sierra would've told me if this was a Windsor restaurant, and I'm certain this isn't one of our assets. I'd have been involved in the acquisition if that was the case.

Luca's eyes find mine, and there's a quiet warning in them, almost as though he's daring me to refute him. I watch him as he leans in and grabs my fork before boldly taking a bite of my fish. "Delicious," he murmurs, his eyes never leaving mine.

"When did you buy this restaurant?" I ask, my voice soft.

Luca leisurely takes another bite of my food. "This afternoon."

My heart starts to race as heat rushes to my cheeks. He bought this restaurant after he found out I was going on a date? Is that also why he implemented the new rule? I clear my throat and awkwardly push my hair behind my ear. "Can I have a word, please? In private."

Theo looks between the two of us, and I smile politely as I rise to my feet. Luca sits back, as though he's about to refuse me, but I grab his arm

tightly and force him to follow me to the restaurant's terrace.

"What do you think you're doing?" I ask, barely restraining my anger.

He grins. "What does it look like I'm doing?"

"Did you seriously buy this restaurant today? Why?"

Luca crosses his arms and nods. "I did."

"I asked you *why*."

He takes a step closer to me, and I take a step back, the two of us continuing this dance until my back hits the wall. Luca leans his forearms against the wall on either side of me, caging me.

"You want the truth, Valentina?"

I nod. "The full truth."

He tilts his head and leans in a little further, until his lips are a mere inch removed from mine. "I don't fucking know," he whispers. "You make me act so fucking irrational when we both know I never make decisions based on my emotions. The second I heard you were going on a date, I knew I couldn't let it happen. So yes, Valentina, I bought a whole fucking restaurant just so I'd have a valid excuse to be here tonight. Yes, I'm actively trying to ruin your date, and yes, I'm not letting you go back to that fucking table." He's breathing as hard as I am, anger and desperation marring his face. "You want the full truth? I fucking hate that you wore red for him, and I can't stand the way you were smiling at him when I walked in. You have *never* smiled that way for me. Not once."

I place my hands on his chest, knowing I should push him away. "Luca, you're completely and utterly *insane*," I whisper.

He takes a step closer, until his body is pressed flush against mine. "I am," he admits. His hand threads through my hair, and he grips tightly. "Because you *drive* me fucking insane."

His lips come crashing down against mine, and I rise to my tiptoes, a soft moan escaping my lips as I kiss him back. Luca tightens his grip on my hair and forces my lips open, deepening our kiss. We shouldn't be doing this, but I can't help myself.

"You taste as sweet as I remember," he murmurs against my lips before sucking down on my bottom lip.

I pull away from him, panting. "We can't," I tell him, my voice breaking. "You know we can't."

He looks into my eyes, his expression portraying the sorrow I feel. "Valentina," he pleads.

I shake my head and look away. “You have to let me go, Luca. This has to end before it ever even starts. You and I… This can’t happen.”

I push against his chest, and he lets his arms fall away. The regret in his gaze perfectly mirrors mine, and helplessness hits me hard. If he wasn’t a Windsor, and I wasn’t his employee… could things have been different between us?

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Chapter Nineteen

VALENTINA

I scroll through my emails on my phone as I walk into the office, my heart sinking. Twenty-six job application rejections, and all of them came in at once. There's only one way this could have happened considering my qualifications. Luca blacklisted me.

I gave him everything for years, and this is how he repays me? Is he ever going to stop playing with my feelings, with my *life*? He knows we can't be together, and I don't even think he truly wants me, yet he won't let me go on a date. He's marrying someone else, but he refuses to even let me leave this job. Why does he hold on to me so tightly when he has no right to? Why does he continue to hurt me?

My mood is somber as I step into the private elevator that leads straight to the office's top floor. Once again, I'm dressed in red, but today it's for an

entirely different reason than yesterday. My mind involuntarily drifts back to Luca's words last night.

I hate that you're wearing red for him.

How did he know? For years, I was certain I wasn't even on Luca's radar, so how could he have known that I wear red whenever I need a dose of courage and good luck? How did he know about the YouTube food channels and the novels Sierra and I read?

I pause by my desk and stare at it for a moment, a profound sense of loss washing over me. Eight years. It isn't just Luca I'm walking away from. It's the company and the people that shaped me. It's Grandma Windsor, and to some extent, Sierra, Raven, and Alanna too. This environment raised me, taught me everything I know. I've spent countless moments in the bathroom on this floor, crying my heart out because one of my superiors scolded me, or because I felt like I didn't measure up amongst all the highly educated and talented people here. It took eight years, but I finally felt like I belonged somewhere.

I glance at Luca's office, my heart heavy. A thousand conflicting feelings rush through me, but each of them tells me the same thing. I need to cut every tie between us.

I inhale deeply as I knock on Luca's door before walking in, my chest aching in a way it never has before. He looks up, his expression as pained as I know mine is.

"Valentina."

The way he says my name has always been different. I used to think his tone carried a hint of disdain, but it sounds a lot more like reverence to me today. Luca's eyes roam over the red suit I'm wearing, and he looks down at his desk in resignation.

"We need to talk."

He nods and lifts his head, his eyes filled with reluctance. The way he looks at me undoes me. It takes all of me to stand my ground, to not waver.

"Blacklisting me isn't going to keep me from leaving, Luca. I fully acknowledge that I wouldn't be who I am without you and your support, but I also firmly believe that I've repaid you for what you've done for me by giving you my all for *eight years*. I've stood by you, Luca. I've worked harder than anyone else, harder than anyone could reasonably expect. How much more will you take? How much longer will you punish me for trying to put myself first? I once heard you say that we should normalize walking

away from toxic situations, isn’t that right? So let me walk away, Luca. Let me go. I’m begging you. Can’t you see that you’re hurting me?”

“I can’t do that,” he murmurs. He rubs his face and looks away. “I’ll do anything you ask of me, Valentina, but letting you go is the one thing I won’t do.”

“Why?” I ask, my voice breaking. “You’re getting married to Natalia in six months, and she should be your focus.”

He looks at me with such helplessness that I struggle to stand my ground. I run a hand through my hair and take a deep breath. “Maybe it’s just the fact that our time together is coming to an end, or maybe it’s some pent-up frustration between us. I don’t know what last night was, but it can’t happen again. I’m not someone you can casually hook up with before your wedding, and certainly not after it.”

Luca rises to his feet and walks around his desk. It takes all of me to stay where I am when my entire body responds to his presence. I can’t tell if I want to walk up to him and be closer to him, or if I want to take several steps away.

“You could never be just another hook-up to me, Valentina,” he murmurs.

“How could I ever be more when you’re marrying someone else?”

He runs a hand through his hair and stares up at the ceiling for a moment. “I don’t *want* to marry her. I’ve only seen her once since we got engaged — that day she came to the office. I saw her then, and later that evening for dinner. That’s it. I have no feelings for her. She means nothing to me.”

“It doesn’t matter,” I snap. “She’s your fiancée. And I? Well, soon I’ll be nothing to you. Until then, we need some boundaries. If we have to work together for six more months—"

Luca laughs humorlessly, cutting me off. “You’re still under the illusion that I’ll let you go, huh? Give your notice, Valentina. Do what you must. When your six months are up, you’ll stay right where you’ve always been. Next to me.”

I stare at him and shake my head. “I can’t do this anymore. You and I… last night never should’ve happened. For eight years, we worked together so perfectly. What changed, Luca? You didn’t want me until you realized that you lost me. I’m not one of your belongings. I’m not an acquisition. The

first time you only touched me because of Joshua, and now it's because I quit. I won't play this game with you."

Luca walks up to me and raises his hand, the tips of his fingers brushing over my temple. He wraps my hair around his finger and twirls it around, his expression pensive. "You made it so I had nothing left to lose," he says, his voice soft. "That's what changed."

The back of his hand brushes over my cheek, and my eyes flutter closed for a moment. "I'd already fucked up at Ares and Raven's wedding, and we barely recovered from it. There's no way I'd risk doing anything that could result in me losing you permanently. But then you quit, and my first instinct was to do everything in my power to make you stay." He chuckles and pulls away. "I thought to myself… if I'm going to lose you regardless of what I do, then why must I continue wondering? Why should I continue suppressing the thoughts I have about you? Why bother lying to both myself and you?"

I bite down on my lip, unsure how to reply. "Luca, I can't stay, and this thing between us? We can't give into it. Your engagement might mean nothing to you, but I'm not that kind of woman. Do you have any idea how guilty I feel about that kiss last night? I never should have… I'm not…"

He runs a hand through his hair and nods. "I know, and I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking straight, and for once, I just wanted to give in and take what I craved so desperately. It won't happen again, so please don't leave me. Don't leave this firm. Don't throw away everything we've fought for. Windsor Finance wouldn't be what it is without you, Valentina. Can you truly walk away from everything we've built?"

I look into his eyes and try my hardest to fight the instinct to give in. "What happens if I stay? There's no further career growth for me here, and you know it. If I stay, it'd be for you… and how is that the right thing to do when you're getting married soon? How is it the right decision for *me*? This job is all I've ever known, but how much longer can I stay in this role? For how much longer can I continue working the hours I do? If I stay, I'll continue to sacrifice my life for you while you'll be building a life with your wife. I'm not getting any younger, Luca. I want a life of my own, too. I want to find out what *happiness* feels like. It isn't about finding love or finding a man to spend my life with — I'm not that romantic. But finding a hobby or two and traveling? I'd love to do that, at least."

He stares at me with such despondency in his eyes that my own heart begins to ache. Part of me wishes he never touched me at all. If he hadn't, could we have been friends after I left?

"You and I… we need to return to what we used to be. We have to forget everything that's happened in the last couple of months, everything that's been said between us. For six more months, let's go back to who we used to be. Let's end this on a good note, Luca."

He inhales deeply, and then he shakes his head. "Don't think I won't put up a fight. Personal feelings aside, you're Windsor Finance's best employee. I'm not letting you go."

I walk toward the door and turn back to look at him, my heart wavering. "I'm not giving you a choice," I tell him, before walking out.

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Chapter Twenty

VALENTINA

I'm restless as I coordinate with our team of personal assistants. I've put them in charge of arranging interviews for my replacement, and it feels bittersweet.

Luca has treated me so well for so many years, and despite his current attitude, I do owe him everything. If not for him, I wouldn't have my degree, or the work experience that turned me into a well-respected, well-known finance professional. Luca Windsor shaped me, and I'll always be grateful for all he's given me.

It isn't the Luca I used to know that I have an issue with. It's the one he became the moment he got engaged. I've stood by his side throughout countless changes in his life, and nothing has shaken him the way this did.

I’m snapped out of my thoughts when my phone rings, and I frown. My mother rarely calls me while I’m at work. Worry instantly has me sitting up in my seat, my heart racing.

“Mom, hi.”

“Val,” she says, her voice trembling. “Abuela… she left home a couple of hours ago, and she hasn’t come back. I’m worried.”

I rise to my feet, my heart hammering in my chest. “What? How long has she been missing? Doesn’t she have her phone on her?”

“No. She left it on her nightstand. I took my wheelchair and searched around the block, but I can’t find her anywhere.”

“Did you check the convenience store? Maybe she’s chatting with Auntie Lee?” Grandma and the convenience store owner have become friends over the years, and sometimes she’ll go over there to chat.

“They haven’t seen her. Usually she would’ve dropped by to say hi to them on her daily walks, but not today.”

“What about the park?”

“I’ve looked, Val. I can’t find her anywhere. I checked the park, I’ve asked all the neighbors, I’ve gone into every store near us. I can’t find her anywhere. Do you… do you think I should file a report?”

“Yes!” I yell, my eyes filling with tears. “Mom, of course. We need to find her as soon as we can. We have no idea what could’ve happened. What if she fell somewhere, and she can’t reach us? What if she needs our help?”

Tears start to run down my face, and I inhale shakily.

“Val,” Mom says. “There’s something I need to tell you. We’ve been keeping this from you because you already have so much on your plate, and Abuela insisted that I shouldn’t worry you.”

I start to tremble and tighten my grip on my phone. “What is it?”

Mom inhales shakily. “Abuela was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s. Lately, she’s been forgetting things more and more often. She keeps getting confused, and sometimes she can’t remember who I am, other times she thinks we’re years in the past and your abuelo is still with us. What if it’s one of those episodes, and she’s trying to find your abuelo? That’s happened before, and I have no idea how far she could go. What if she’s trying to get back to our old house?”

“I’m coming home right now,” I tell her as I grab my bag and rush out the door, barely able to see through my tears. “We’ll find her. It’s going to be okay.”

Mom has already checked every single place I can think of. Where could Abuela possibly be?

Worry makes me sick to my stomach, and it takes all of me to stay calm. I need to think clearly. I'll find her, if it's the last thing I do.

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Chapter Twenty-One

LUCA

I pause by Valentina's empty desk and frown, feeling unsettled. "Where is she?" I ask the girl that's walking toward me. I believe she's one of the new personal assistants that Valentina hired, but I have no idea what her name is.

"Mr. Windsor," she says, bowing her head slightly. "Val left after receiving a call from her mother. From what I could tell, her grandmother is missing. They don't know where she's gone, and she's been missing for hours."

My eyes widen as worry sets in. Valentina's grandmother means everything to her. I have no doubt she's beside herself. Something this significant happened, and she didn't feel like she could come to me for help?

“When did Valentina leave here?”

“She’s been away for about two hours now.”

I run a hand through my hair and walk back to my office. How could something like this happen without me knowing? Have I truly pushed her so far away that she no longer feels like she can rely on me?

“Mr. Windsor! I finalized the interview schedule. Please take a look at it.”

I hold my hand up and shake my head. “Not now.”

My office door slams closed behind me, and ten seconds later, I’ve got Silas Sinclair on the line.

“Windsor? Before you ask me for anything at all, please know that Alanna is still mad you ruined Val’s date.”

“Shut up and listen,” I snap. “Valentina’s grandmother is missing. I need you to find her within the hour. She’s old, and she’s been missing for most of the day now. Find her, and make sure she’s fine. I want a medical team on standby too, just in case.”

“You got it,” he says instantly. “I’ll update you every ten minutes. I got you, man. We’ll find her.”

I sit down behind my desk, beside myself with worry. If this was my own grandmother, I’d fucking lose it. Sinclair better come through for me.

I tap my finger impatiently, unable to focus on anything. Should I call Valentina and go to her? Am I even of any help to her right now? If I showed up now, would that only further distress her?

Silas Sinclair: *we gained control over all the cameras near her house, and we’re combing through the footage now to see if we can find Val’s grandmother’s trail.*

I stare at my phone, feeling like there’s more I should be doing, but unsure what. I cup the back of my neck, unable to calm my racing heart.

A knock sounds on my door, and I sit up, welcoming the distraction. The door opens, and Valentina walks in, her hair disheveled and her mascara smudged. I expected to find panic in her eyes, but all I find is quiet confidence and assertion.

“Luca,” she says, her voice soft. She pauses in front of my desk and stares down at me. I’ve never seen her look at me that way. She’s never looked at me with quite so much trust in those beautiful hazel eyes. “I’d like to make a deal.”

I glance at my phone, but I haven't received another update from Silas yet, and I'm getting restless. "A deal?" I ask, intrigued.

She nods. "I need something, and I need you to give it your all. In return, I'll stay. I'll retract my resignation letter, and I'll continue to work for you without a single complaint. I won't leave until you ask me to, and I'll act like the last few weeks between us didn't happen. Everything will go back to the way it used to be. I'll make sure of it."

I raise my brows, surprised by her bravado. I wasn't sure she'd come to me for help at all, and if she did, I didn't think she'd do it in such a calm manner. I thought she'd stumble into my office, begging for my help. I should've known better.

"What is it you need, Valentina?"

She hesitates, a hint of doubt creeping into her eyes. "Luca, I need you to find my grandmother for me. She…" Her voice breaks, and she clears her throat as she straightens her back. "She went for a walk this morning, and she hasn't come home. It's been five hours, and I'm worried. Find her for me, and I'll stay."

I stare at her, taking in the hint of desperation that's bleeding into her expression. Doesn't she know I'd do anything for her if she just asks? The only thing I can't do is let her go. I'm a fucking asshole, and I know it, but there's no way I can let this chance pass me by. How did I not see it before? This is the solution to all of my problems.

"How much does your grandmother mean to you?" I ask, my voice soft.

Her eyes flash, and she tenses. "She's everything to me. My grandmother raised me, and I'd do anything for her. I'll beg if you want me to, Luca. There's nothing I won't do."

I smirk, finally seeing a sliver of hope. "She means everything to you? Then give me everything in return. I'll make every single resource at my disposal available to you, on one condition."

Valentina hesitates, but then she nods. "I meant what I said," she tells me. "There's nothing I won't do."

I clasp my hands and grin. "Marry me, Valentina." It's risky, but it's a risk I'm willing to take. There's no other way for me to keep her by my side, and this would solve both issues. I'll get rid of Natalia, and I get to chain Valentina to me.

She stares at me, wide-eyed. "I… *what*?"

I lean in and rest my elbow on my desk, my chin pressed against my fist. “Marry me. If you marry me, I’ll do everything in my power to find your grandmother as quickly as humanly possible.”

She stares at me in confusion, so I smile at her reassuringly. “I’m sure you’re aware that I don’t want to marry Natalia. My grandmother loves you, so even if she’s mad initially, she’ll accept our marriage eventually. I’m certain that she won’t disown me if it’s *you*.” In fact, it can’t be anyone other than her. Valentina is the only woman my grandmother would ever accept. I’m surprised it hadn’t occurred to me sooner. It’s highly risky — if Grandma doesn’t agree with my decision, I’ll lose everything. But if I get to keep Valentina close, I think it’s a risk worth taking.

She shakes her head. “I’m sorry, I don’t understand. You… you’re already engaged, Luca. This isn’t…”

I wave my hand and smile up at her sweetly. “Semantics,” I tell her, my heart racing. I need her to say yes. “Tell me you’ll marry me, Valentina. The rest, we’ll figure out later.”

She looks into my eyes, and for a moment, I see a hint of longing in her gaze, but disdain drowns it out. “Yes,” she tells me, her voice soft, defeated. “Help me find my grandmother, and I’ll marry you.”

Relief unlike anything I’ve ever felt before rushes through me, and I smirk. Before I can even utter another word, my phone starts to buzz. I pick it up and read the messages Silas sent me before looking back at my soon-to-be wife, my heart finally at ease.

“We found her. She’s being escorted home right now. She’s fine, but she has some scratches on her hands, and she isn’t sure where she got them. My medical team is with her, and she’s being treated as we speak. From what I understand, she got on a bus and then became confused, so she stayed on it, switching back and forth at each end station.” I rise to my feet and grab my suit jacket. “Let’s go. We’ll head over to your grandma’s house. We should arrive at the same time as she does if we leave right now.”

She stands frozen in place, her entire body tense as I walk around my desk. I pause in front of her, and she looks up at me with an unreadable expression. “You’d already given the order to find her?”

I smile at her and brush the back of my hand over her cheek, my touch tender. “Hey, I’m not the one who wanted to make a deal,” I remind her. “And a deal is a deal.”

I lead her out of my office, unable to keep the smile off my face. It wasn’t until the words left my mouth that I realized this is what I want above all else. I want Valentina as my wife.

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Chapter Twenty-Two

VALENTINA

"We'll get married this evening," Luca tells me the second I end my call with my mother. We should be arriving at Abuela's house within the next few minutes, but I couldn't rest easy until my mother confirmed that Abuela truly is okay.

I stare at Luca for a moment and shake my head. "No, we won't."

He raises his brows. "Need I remind you that we had a deal?"

"Do you have that in writing?"

He grins dangerously. "I do not."

"Do you have a witness?"

He shakes his head and chuckles darkly. "You know I don't."

"Then… do you have any leverage? Because I just got off the phone with my mother, and she confirmed that my grandmother is at home and

perfectly fine now.”

Luca’s eyes roam over my body, and he smiles humorlessly as he undoes my seatbelt. He reaches for me and pulls me onto his lap in one smooth move, using his free hand to push a button that makes a divider rise between his driver and us.

I push against him, but that just gives him a chance to reposition me so I’m straddling him. My skirt rides up, and I blush fiercely as Luca tightens his grip on my waist, keeping me in place.

“Well played, Valentina,” he says, his voice low. His eyes flash dangerously. “I should’ve known better. I did, after all, train you myself.”

My heart starts to race as he buries a hand in my hair and tilts my head so I’m facing him properly. The way he’s looking at me undoes me. Luca cups my cheek, his thumb brushing over my bottom lip. “Tell me why,” he murmurs, pained. “I won’t ask you for anything in return for finding your grandmother, Valentina, but give me this much. Tell me why you won’t marry me.”

I look into his light brown eyes, my heart thumping loudly. There are a thousand reasons we shouldn’t be together, and he knows it. “You know you have to marry someone who is an asset to your family, and I’m not. Even if it isn’t Natalia… it’ll never be me.”

“That isn’t true. Dion’s fiancée, Faye, isn’t from a prominent family. She’s a normal girl from a middle-class family, and my grandmother adores her just as much as she adores you. So why can’t it be you? Do you truly dislike me that much?”

I look into his eyes, unable to figure him out. Has he truly lost his mind this time? “Why would you want to marry me, Luca?”

He brushes the back of his fingers over my cheek and smiles. “I don’t want to get married at all, but if I must, I want to marry the one woman that’s been by my side for years. You and I work together perfectly, and nothing would have to change if you don’t want it to. There isn’t anything I won’t give you if you save me from Natalia. You might not be the woman my grandmother chose for me, but you’re the only other woman she’ll ever accept. Besides, you know how good we can be together. It’s no secret that I want you, so why not enjoy each other for a few years?”

I frown, my thoughts reeling. “You’re proposing a marriage of convenience?”

He nods. “That’s what it would be with Natalia. I only have to remain married for three years to get my hands on my inheritance, but I can’t see myself lasting that long with her. You, on the other hand? We’ve been together for eight years. What’s another few years? You’d walk away with whatever the hell you want. There must be something I can offer you?”

I look into his eyes, thrown off. I know Luca well enough to know that he’s serious. He wouldn’t have brought this up if he wasn’t seriously considering this as an option. Initially, I thought he was just acting impulsively, but that doesn’t seem to be the case. “There isn’t,” I murmur. “All I need is for you to let me go. Stop sabotaging my efforts to find a new job and let me go. I’m tired of playing games with you, of feeling used and manipulated. I could never marry someone like you — not even for a mere three years.”

For a split-second, I see pain flash through his eyes, but then he averts his gaze and sighs. “Valentina,” he murmurs. “At least think about it.”

The car stops in front of my abuela’s house, and I push away from him, flustered. “Don’t follow me,” I warn him, before getting out of the car and slamming the door closed. I can’t focus on anything but Abuela right now. Marriage? To Luca? He truly has lost it. What makes him think I’d marry him after everything he put me through in the last couple of weeks? Blacklisting me is one thing, but using Abuela as a way to coerce me into marriage? He truly is rotten to the core.

I walk into the house and pause in the doorway, my eyes finding Abuela. She’s sitting on the sofa, surrounded by medical professionals, a frown on her face. It’s clear that she doesn’t fully understand what’s going on, and it worries me.

I walk up to her and kneel in front of her, my hands wrapping over hers. “Where did you go?” I ask, my voice breaking. “Do you have any idea how worried I was?”

“*Rosa*,” she reprimands me. “I’ve told you so many times I went for a walk. *Stop* asking me,” she snaps.

My heart drops as she yanks her hands out of mine. She doesn’t recognize me. Tears start to gather in my eyes, and I inhale sharply.

“Valentina.” I look up to find Luca standing by my side, his hand outstretched. I thought he’d left, yet here he is. There’s no anger in his eyes. There’s only compassion and unwavering support that I’d never expect from him. I place my hand in his, and he helps me up.

“Didn’t I tell you not to follow me?” I ask him, my voice weak.

He smiles at me and gently brushes my hair out of my face. “I thought I told you I’d never let you go?” he replies. “How could I walk away when you need me the most?”

I sniff as a tear runs down my face, and he catches it with his thumb, his expression so tender that it takes all of me not to burst out crying.

Luca places a hand on my shoulder and gently guides me toward the medical team, a serene expression on his face. I look up at him, and he smiles encouragingly. “It’s okay,” he murmurs. “She’s fine, Valentina. That’s all that matters for now, okay?”

I nod, and he places his hand on my lower back as his doctor gives me an overview of my grandmother’s condition. “I would recommend a caretaker,” he says, his voice soft, almost as though he’s reluctant to say anything at all. No doubt he’s seen the state of our house. It’s small, and all of our possessions are old. It’s obvious we can’t afford round-the-clock care. “Her condition will continue to worsen, and at times, she might become violent. It’ll frustrate her to forget things, and soon, she’ll start to struggle with simple tasks. She needs assistance.”

I bite down on my lip, my heart heavy. I can’t afford that, and even the best insurance wouldn’t cover all of it. I want to get her the best care possible, but how am I supposed to do that? Considering my funds, there’ll be no way for me to monitor if the staff I hire are treating her with kindness. With my budget, they’ll likely just do the bare minimum. In six months, I’m about to be without a job too.

I glance up at Luca, regret weighing heavy on me. I’ll have to stay in my job, but if I do that… can I bear to watch him get married? His earlier words resound through my mind, and I look into his eyes, my lips moving before I even realize what I’m doing.

“There *is* something I want, Luca,” I tell him, my voice barely above a whisper.

He smiles, a victorious glint in his eyes.

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Chapter Twenty-Three

LUCA

The atmosphere is tense between us as I lead Valentina into my home office. We've been here together uncountable times, but never regarding a deal quite as important as this one.

I didn't realize it until the words left my lips, but this is what I want above all else. I want Valentina as my wife. Strategically, it's the right decision.

Making her my wife will prevent her from leaving, and it rids me of Natalia. Having her in my bed will be a nice added bonus.

I grab a blank sheet of paper and hold it up. "I won't be making the same mistake twice," I tell her, my tone disgruntled. "I finally understand how all the men you've dealt with throughout the years felt. You're a vicious fucking shark, Valentina Diaz."

Valentina smiles and crosses her arms. “What can I say? I learned from the best.”

I smile back at her and shake my head ruefully. Yeah, Valentina is a weapon that can’t fall into enemy hands. She’s fully capable of crushing me if she so pleases, I have no doubt.

“Tell me what you want in return for marrying me, Valentina.”

Her eyes roam over my face, her expression carefully guarded. I wonder what it is she sees, what it is she wants from me. Everyone has a price, and ultimately, Valentina is no different. No woman I’ve ever met has looked at me and wanted me for who I truly am.

Without my wealth and the prestige of the Windsor name, I’d be nothing. In the end, a transactional marriage suits me best. When there are clear boundaries and expectations, there’s no room for disappointment or hurt.

Valentina hesitates, and I involuntarily tense. “Are you sure you want to do this, Luca? There’s a chance your grandmother won’t let it slide, and she’ll take away your inheritance. Is that a risk you’re knowingly willing to take?”

I smile at her and pick up my pen, ready to draft our contract. “It’s a far smaller risk than you might think. You know how much my grandmother likes you. Do you truly believe she’ll punish me for supposedly following my heart? I’ll tell her I’m in love with you, and I couldn’t see a future without you. Tell me, Valentina. What do you think she’ll do, knowing that she was the one who pushed you onto my path in the first place?”

She looks away, knowing I’m right. I wouldn’t get away with this ploy if it had been anyone but her.

“Luca, she might like me, and she might think I’m a good asset to the company, but that doesn’t mean she’d want me to join her *family*.”

“If that was true, she wouldn’t insist that you join for family dinner so often.”

She falls silent, the gears in her brain turning.

“Leave her to me,” I tell her. “No matter her reaction, I’ll abide by the terms of our contract. Whatever I promise you, I’ll deliver, regardless of whether or not this will work.”

She nods hesitantly, and I glance down at the empty sheet of paper in front of me. “Tell me your requirements.”

The way she looks at me makes me wonder if she's trying to determine whether to put her faith in me. She brushes her hair out of her face and inhales deeply, as though she's gathering her courage. "I want the very best care you can get my grandmother, including home renovations where required. I want round-the-clock care, and caretakers that will treat her with respect and affection, no matter how bad she gets." She pauses then. "Once we divorce, I also want enough money to continue that level of care for the rest of her life."

Perhaps she isn't quite as clever as I thought her to be, or she'd have known I'd give her whatever she wants, unconditionally, if she simply asks for it. If she were to deny my proposal and plead for help, I'd still grant it.

"What else? This is your one chance to demand anything from me. If it's in my power, I'll grant it."

She hesitates, but then she steels her spine and smiles. "I won't stay in my role as Executive Secretary for much longer. From what I understand, Stephen is looking to retire. Once he does, I want his job. I want to be the Chief Operating Officer of Windsor Finance. I don't need you to give me the job, but I want your vote when the next COO is appointed."

Her request doesn't surprise me in the slightest. If anything, I should've started quietly advocating for her already. "It's only right that your career continues to advance, especially now that I'm asking you to stay when one of the reasons you wanted to leave was further career growth. You have my full support, Valentina."

I've been selfish with her, and I'm starting to realize that I can't forcibly keep her by my side. Even now, as I'm about to marry her, it's because it's mutually beneficial. If I hold on to her too tightly, I'll only end up crushing her.

"Luca," she says, her tone firm. "There's one more thing."

I straighten my back, intrigued by the look in her eyes. Whatever she's about to tell me is clearly non-negotiable. Interesting.

"I don't want anyone but our families to know about our marriage. We'll be getting a divorce in three years, and I can't risk being known as your ex-wife for the rest of my life. I'd like to walk away with a clean slate and no baggage, and I can't do that if I'm forever linked to you."

She sighs and looks away. "I don't want our marriage to impact my job either. For years, there have been rumors about me sleeping with you to get

ahead, and I don’t want any of that to seem true. I’d like us to separate our professional and private lives.”

I don’t like the sound of that. My need to publicly claim her as mine is barely tolerable, yet I have no choice but to suppress it if I want her to marry me. Besides, there’s no way I can disclose our marriage even if I wanted to, not with the engagement hanging over my head. “Understood. But in return, I have some requirements of my own.”

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Chapter Twenty-Four

VALENTINA

Luca stares at me for a moment, a vicious glint in his eyes. I didn't think I'd ever find myself in this situation, negotiating the terms of my *marriage* with a man I spent years hating.

Even now, my feelings for him are complicated. I hate that he's using my weakness to coerce me into a situation I want no part of, and it pains me to know that even now, as he's about to make me his wife, I'm nothing but a tool to him.

I'm unsure if I'll be able to walk away in three years unscathed. I may pretend I'm made of ice, but there's no denying that Luca affects me in a way no one else ever has. In just the last few months, he's hurt me more than I thought he was capable of. How much will be left of my heart by the time we part ways?

“Tell me your requirements,” I murmur.

He nods at me. “My grandmother will have several rules we’ll have to abide by. I suspect they’ll be the same ones she laid down for Ares and Raven. Our marriage must last for three years, and throughout that time, we cannot be apart for more than three consecutive days at a time.”

I purse my lips and nod. “That won’t be a problem. We haven’t been apart for over three days at a time for years, bar a few holidays here and there.”

Luca smirks then. “It looks like you may be misunderstanding what I’m telling you. This marriage may be temporary, Valentina, but it’ll be very fucking real. I want you to move in with me, and I want you in my bed, every single night.”

I open my mouth to protest, but he holds up his hand and chuckles. “It’s no secret that I want you, but this isn’t a rule I came up with myself. It’s a rule my grandmother will lay down once she finds out what we’ve done.”

The mere thought of sharing a bed with Luca has me flustered. When he touches me, he makes me lose all reason, all restraint. I become a version of myself I hardly recognize, and the loss of control is daunting, yet entirely irresistible.

“Look at me.”

I bite down on my lip as I obey his words, heat rushing through me as memories come flooding in. The first time he uttered those words was when he had his fingers deep inside me. He was toying with my body the way he’s toying with my life right now.

“From this day onward, you’re mine, Valentina. Your body, your thoughts, your dreams. For three full years, I want all of you. Think about this carefully, because there’s no going back. I don’t do things halfheartedly.”

I nod and wrap my arms around myself, feeling oddly vulnerable. “I can agree to that,” I murmur, ashamed of the way my body still craves him despite everything. “But in return, you have to promise me fidelity. If you want me in that way, I need to know you’re not touching anyone else. Cheating is the one thing I can’t ever tolerate. I don’t believe in love, Luca, and I’d prefer a marriage without anything as complicated as that, but fidelity is something I can’t compromise on.”

For a moment, my thoughts turn back to the past, to a time I was foolish enough to believe my mother was wrong, and true love did exist, but she

just hadn’t found it. I look up at Luca, my heart aching. I barely recovered then, but if I ever fell for Luca, it’d destroy me.

He looks at me in that way he does when he’s trying to read me, and I do my best to school my features. I don’t want or need him prying into my past.

“I will never cheat on you, Valentina. For as long as you’re my wife, there will only be you. You’re the only one I’ll touch, the only one I’ll desire. Not even my thoughts will stray. I can say that with full confidence, because you’ve dominated my fantasies for far longer than I care to admit. It’s unlikely to change anytime soon, if ever.”

Heat rushes to my cheeks, and I avert my gaze. He’s been… fantasizing about me? For how long?

“In return, I ask for your fidelity, too. I’ll fulfill all your desires, Valentina, so don’t you ever go looking elsewhere.”

I avert my gaze and nod. “I won’t ever stray. That isn’t something you’ll ever have to worry about. I’ll always be loyal and faithful to you, but that is all I’ll give you. Three years is a long time, and throughout it, we’ll no doubt confuse the lust and intimacy we feel for love, but I don’t want that to impact us. Love is fleeting. It’s a chemical reaction that fades over time, and it can’t be a factor in our marriage. No matter how we think we feel, I want us to end our marriage in three years, as agreed. No matter what. I’d rather know when it’ll all be over instead of waiting for the day an emotion as fickle as love finally fades. I want to be in charge of my life, not be at the mercy of some useless emotion.”

His gaze is searching, as though he wants to know what prompted me to tell him this, and whether another man was the cause of it. As always, though, Luca doesn’t pry.

“Are you telling me not to fall in love with you?”

My heart skips a beat, and I lower my eyes. “I suppose so.”

“Look at me,” he says again, his voice low, dangerous.

I can’t help the way my heart races as I lift my head, nerves stealing away my resolve.

“I’m fine making that promise, but are you sure you won’t regret it? What if we find out that we’re incredibly happy together, and we don’t want to part ways in three years? What if *you* fall in love with *me*?”

I chuckle humorlessly and shake my head. “That will *never* happen.”

Luca raises his brows, and for a single moment, I was certain I saw something akin to pain or disappointment flash through his eyes, but no doubt I was mistaken.

“Fine,” he tells me. “We won’t fall in love with each other.”

Genuine relief washes over me, and I exhale slowly. This arrangement is bound to bring complexity and chaos to the relationship we so carefully built. It’s best for us to minimize any confusion right from the start. I may have agreed to marry him, but I have no intention of getting hurt any further.

“Other than the terms my grandmother will ask us to abide by, there is one more thing I’d like to ask of you.”

I nod, curious. He sounds uncertain, and I’ve never seen Luca look so tormented. What is it he wants?

“I want you to assist me with making my father’s intended legacy a reality.”

His father’s legacy? Luca never talks about his parents, so for him to bring this up now is surprising, to say the least.

“The restructuring plans you’ve been helping me with aren’t mine. They are my father’s. When he passed away, I inherited a journal that documented his vision for Windsor Finance, and I’d like to make it come true. I’ll need your help with that. I genuinely don’t think I can do it without you, Valentina.”

I stare at him speechlessly. I wondered why he forged ahead with acquisitions we didn’t necessarily need. For years now, Luca has been strategically acquiring a variety of companies, ranging from payment processors to deep-learning technology companies. I’ve been wondering why, but he never told me his rationale. All I’ve ever received from him was orders, and I executed them perfectly. We’ve grown into a finance firm that offers far more than banking services — we now do asset management, mergers and acquisitions, trading, and so much more. All of it under Luca’s guidance.

“My father imagined Windsor Finance being a company that would touch people’s daily lives. In this day and age, it means that we want people to use our bank, but also for other banks to run their e-commerce payments through our systems. The vision has shifted a little as technology continues to advance, but I want to adhere to my father’s ideology. He might not be there to see it all come true, but I still want to make it happen.”

He runs a hand through his hair and looks away. “When my dad ran this company, he’d only just turned it from The Windsor Bank into a little more than that. He wanted to offer mortgages, small loans, credit cards, but that’s not all. If it relates to finance, he wanted people to think of us and choose us. My father didn’t want Windsor Finance to be just another company solely aimed at making a profit. He intended to profit off bigger corporations, asset management and mergers, so he could accept a lower margin when dealing with individuals. He wanted to make lives easier and support dreams without extorting people like so many of our competitors do. My dad… he wanted people to turn to us when they want to open a small bakery, or when they can’t afford to go to college, but also when they’re trying to grow their companies and don’t know how. Throughout each phase of people’s lives, he wanted Windsor Finance to be there. Will you help me realize that vision?”

I’ve never seen him look so passionate, so emotional. This clearly means a lot to him, and I’m surprised I’m only just finding out about it. For years, I thought he was being eccentric. If he could hide this from me, then what else did I get wrong? Is there a chance that I don’t know him as well as I think I do?

“I suppose it’s only right for your wife to stand by you, isn’t it? I’ll help you, Luca.”

The look in his eyes morphs into something that makes my heart race, and I look away, unable to hold his gaze. “My wife, huh?” he murmurs, a sweet smile making its way onto his lips.

“There’s only one thing left to do,” he tells me as he hands me our handwritten contract. I take it from him with trembling hands and look it over. One signature, and I’ll be signing away my life.

Luca smiles when I sign the contract, the same way he does when we assist with a successful IPO or when we win a big client. I suppose this is no different to him.

“Tonight,” he says, his voice soft. “Let’s get married tonight.”

I frown. “How is that even possible?”

Luca merely shrugs and throws me a look, as though to remind me of who he is. “Zach can marry us. He owes me a favor anyway.”

Zach?

“He’s Xavier’s brother,” Luca elaborates.

A soft gasp escapes my lips as I finally make the connection. “*Mayor Kingston*?”

Luca nods as he picks up his phone. “There’s absolutely no way you’re walking out of here as anything but my wife,” he warns me. “Matter of fact, the only reason we’re walking out of here tonight at all is to pick up your stuff.”

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Chapter Twenty-Five

VALENTINA

I stare at our marriage certificate in disbelief. All it took was a few minutes and a couple of signatures for us to be legally married. It doesn't seem real, but I know it is. The mayor himself married us, after all. Not a single part of our ceremony felt real. It was rushed, and it felt as impersonal as I'm sure our marriage will be.

"Is it really necessary for me to move in with you?" I ask as Luca parks in front of my apartment.

"Yes," he says, his voice soft. He turns to look at me and smiles gently. He's been different from the moment we signed the paperwork. He's calmer, somehow. I can't quite put my finger on what it is exactly. I suppose it's a relief to know he found a way out of his arranged marriage, but I'm uncertain where we stand. What will our marriage look like?

I’m quiet as I lead him into my home, my thoughts turning back to the last time he was here. I still remember his drunken pleas, and the way my heart wavered. I’d been so determined to leave him in the past, so how did I end up standing here as his wife?

Luca pauses in the middle of my living room and looks around. “For this to work, we’ll need to act like we’re head over heels with each other. Besides, you know that there are rules relating to marriage and my inheritance. We can’t risk fucking this up. I need you to be on my side, Valentina, until the very end.”

I nod and look up at him. “I’ve always been on your side, Luca.”

He smiles at me, and the way my heart races makes me lower my gaze. I suddenly feel vulnerable in a way I never have before, and I’m not sure what to make of it. I walk away under the pretense of packing my things, but Luca follows me into my bedroom. Standing here with him, in such a small intimate space… it makes me oddly nervous. If I can barely handle this, how am I supposed to share a bed with him?

“Valentina.”

I tense when I feel his hands on my shoulders, and my heart skips a beat. He slowly turns me around, our bodies so close to each other that my chest brushes against his.

“Do you regret it?” he asks, his voice soft.

I look up at him, taking in the hint of concern in his brown eyes. “I’m not sure yet,” I tell him honestly. “It doesn’t really feel real, and I’m worried we rushed into this.”

Luca cups my cheek, his touch gentle. “We can have a proper wedding, Valentina, with all of our friends and family present. If that is what you want, I’ll make it happen.”

“*No*,” say. “This… it’s perfect for us. The fewer people know about us, the better.”

His expression hardens. “Who exactly are you trying to hide me from? Is there someone else?” There’s an edge to his tone that I’ve never heard before. Is he… is he *jealous*?

“No,” I reassure him. “But we both know this’ll end someday. Three years will fly by, and once it’s all over, I want true freedom of my own. I want my own life without being tied down by the past. Sometimes it’s like you forget who you are. It’d be impossible for me to escape the Windsor name if our marriage was publicized.”

Luca sits down on my bed, his gaze pensive. It's odd having him here. I've lived in this apartment for the last five years, but he's never once been in my bedroom. He looks huge sitting on my small bed, and having him in my space makes me feel strangely flustered.

What will it be like to live with him? Despite our close working relationship, it isn't common for us to hang out together. I have no idea who he even is when he isn't working. I've seen him around his family, but that isn't quite the same.

"I'm ready," I tell him as I close my duffel bag. "This is all I really need for the next few days."

Luca nods and takes the bag from me. "I'll have some movers come in to pack the rest for you."

I glance around my bedroom, my heart heavy. This is the first real home I've ever had of my own. It feels bittersweet to leave it behind. "What will happen to this apartment? Will you give it to another staff member?"

Luca glances over his shoulder and chuckles. "Mrs. Windsor," he says, his voice low and dangerous. "You don't quite realize that you're the only one in my entire company that got this specific perk, do you? This apartment is yours. It always will be. I just never formally signed it over to you because I was worried you wouldn't accept it."

I stare at his broad back as he leads me back to his car. *Mrs. Windsor.* I suppose that's who I am now. It's so surreal.

Luca holds the car door open for me, and I frown. Normally, that's the driver's job, and when the driver isn't there, like today, it's *my* job. "You're my wife now," he says, a small smile on his face. "It's my duty and privilege to do these kinds of things for you. We aren't at work right now, Valentina."

My thoughts are reeling as I take a seat. Luca seems different now, less abrasive, and I don't know what to make of it. "Is it true?" I ask when he sits down next to me.

He turns to face me and grabs my hand, holding it in his. His gaze drops to our hands, and he slowly entwines our fingers, his touch gentle. "Yes," he says.

"Why? Why would you give me company perks no one else had?"

The way his thumb rubs over the back of my hand is distracting, and it throws me off. I wasn't expecting him to be gentle with me. I thought everything would stay the same with the exception of us sleeping together

occasionally, but this tenderness… it's surprising. When he acts this way, it's like I don't know him at all.

Luca looks into my eyes, his expression one I've never seen before. "Does it matter?" He looks away for a moment and sighs. "To be honest, I'm not sure either. I just knew I wanted to do more for you, but I never really thought too hard about why. I just did it."

I stare at his profile, admiring his straight nose and his strong jaw. I always tried not to look at him too long, out of fear it'd be considered unprofessional, but today I'm getting my fill. "For years, I thought you hated me."

He smiles then. "I did, at the start. I still don't know why my grandmother hired you back then, and I don't like that. I felt manipulated, and I was convinced you had ulterior motives... But at some point, those feelings morphed into something else altogether, without me even realizing it. I kept convincing myself that I couldn't stand you, but all the while, I kept relying on you more, until you became indispensable to me." Luca looks into my eyes, and my heart skips a beat. "How could I hate you when you're the only person I can see myself spending three years with? When you told me that you quit, I was a fucking wreck, Valentina. Nah. I don't hate you. I hate how much I fucking want you. I hate how beautiful you are, and I hate how much you mess with my mind. Above all, I always hated that you weren't mine."

I tear my gaze away, my cheeks flushed and my heart pounding wildly. The man holding my hand… he isn't the cold and indifferent Luca I know. I don't recognize this version of him, and it terrifies me.

It terrifies me, because this version of Luca? This is a man I could lose my heart to.

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Chapter Twenty-Six

VALENTINA

My heart is thumping in my chest as I sit up in Luca's bed, my most conservative pajamas covering every inch of me. I purposely chose the ugliest, rattiest, most old-fashioned pajamas I've got. It's a black and white checkered two-piece, and it makes me look like a freaking Dalmatian. I don't think I've ever looked quite this unattractive before.

I can't even figure out why I'm acting this way. I'm not one to get scared, or to be intimidated, yet the idea of spending the night with Luca fills me with a strange kind of anxiety. Everything happened so quickly that I haven't had a chance to truly let it sink in. How are we supposed to go from weeks of arguments and distance to… whatever this is? We can't.

The distinct sound of the shower running fills my ears, keeping my nerves sky-high. I've been in Luca's home countless times, yet it all feels

brand new and unfamiliar. I still remember when he had this place renovated, two years after we started working together. Back then, he still hadn't given up on making me quit, and he'd made me decorate his entire house for him.

I'm the one who chose this bed, and I even hand-selected these pillows for him. I never thought I'd someday end up sharing his bed. I never could've imagined that someday, I'd be his wife.

My jaws clench involuntarily as I think back to the way he'd decline twenty different pillows, just to annoy me. It was around that time that he realized nothing he could ask of me would be too much. I did it all with a pleasant smile on my face, even when I felt like I wasn't learning anything, or when the things he'd ask of me clearly fell outside of my job role.

Was that when things started to change between us? Shortly after, he started entrusting me with more important work. The change was gradual, but that was a definite turning point.

"What are you thinking about so hard?"

My eyes widen when I see him standing in the doorway with nothing but a pair of black boxer shorts on. My eyes roam over his body, and my face flushes instantly. I always thought he looked amazing in a suit, but he looks far better without it. My eyes settle on the waistband of his boxer shorts, where a deep V is clearly visible below his abs. I know that he works out every single day, but I never quite realized what the result of that would be.

"Valentina?" he says, his tone amused.

I tear my gaze away, my face no doubt red. "Just happy to learn that the pillows I picked are as comfortable as I remember them being."

Luca chuckles, and I glance back at him to find him looking somewhat remorseful. He cups the back of his neck and looks away. "They were just replaced," he murmurs. "Thank you for that, by the way. I'm not sure I've ever told you this, but when you do something, you do it well."

My lips tug up into a genuine smile, and I shake my head. When I bought these pillows, I also requested that the store replace them every two years. I didn't think he'd even realized that. I always assumed that's something his housekeeper would handle. Luca has a whole team that comes in while he's at work, and they take care of his every need.

He walks up to the bed, and I swallow hard. "Are you… are you going to sleep like *that*?"

Luca gets into bed and turns to face me, his back against the headboard. Is he purposely keeping his torso on display for me? “Why? Does it bother you?”

I tug at the collar of my pajamas and shake my head. “No. Of course not.” I can’t admit that it *does* bother me — that would feel too much like admitting defeat.

Luca laughs, and I glance at him, my heart skipping a beat. He looks so ridiculously sexy, lying in bed like that. I don’t think I’ve ever seen him look so relaxed, so disarmed. “Hey, Perdita,” he murmurs.

I raise my brows, surprised he knows the names of any of the *101 Dalmatians*.

“There’s an important aspect of our wedding ceremony that we missed out on.”

“What part?” I ask, confused.

“The part where I get to kiss the bride.”

My eyes widen, and I look away, flustered. My embarrassment earns me another chuckle from him, and I see him shake his head from my peripheral vision. “You’re so fucking cute,” he murmurs. “I didn’t think you could get more beautiful, but I think I like you best just like this. Your long hair falling down your shoulders, your face devoid of any makeup. It just highlights how naturally beautiful you are, Mrs. Windsor.”

Mrs. Windsor. I don’t think I’ll ever get used to hearing him say that. How come he’s so unaffected? How is this not insanely weird to him?

Luca reaches for me, eliciting a soft yelp from me when he lifts me into his arms and positions me so I’m straddling him, our positions the same as in the car. It seems so long ago, but it’s only been a few hours. He places his hands on my thighs and looks into my eyes, his gaze moving leisurely, as though he’s trying to memorize every inch of my face.

I look away, confused by the way my heart races. I’m still mad at him, but when he looks at me like that, I can’t help but want to forgive him.

“Valentina,” he whispers, his voice husky. “Look at me.”

I bite down on my lip, my entire body tensing at those words. Does he know what he does to me when he says that? Does he realize which memories resurface when I hear him say those words?

“Look at me, wife.”

I do as he asks, my heart hammering in my chest. My cheeks are flushed, and I can barely make myself raise my head.

“Thank you,” he murmurs.

My eyes widen, and he grins at me.

“I suppose it isn’t often that you hear me say that, is it?” He reaches for me, the tips of his fingers brushing over my temple gently. “If not for you, I’d have to spend three years in pure torment. I know this situation isn’t ideal for you, and I’ve asked too much of you, but I’ll do everything in my power to ensure you don’t regret this, Valentina. I may never have been a good boss to you, but I’ll be a good husband. I promise.”

I stare at him in disbelief, surprised by the sincerity in his gaze. From the moment we got married, he’s been surprising me at every turn. He’s been gentle and kind, and so very unlike the man I know.

“Luca,” I murmur, my voice shaky. I don’t know how to ask the questions that I need an answer to. “We’re married now, but technically, you’re still engaged to Natalia. I need to know where we stand and what you expect of me.”

He turns his wrist, the back of his hand brushing over my cheek, his eyes on mine. “Let’s take a few days to grow accustomed to each other before we tell my grandmother, to ensure that we’re acting in a natural and intimate way, the way a real couple would. Would anyone believe us when you look at me like you’d love to kill me in my sleep?”

I can’t help but smile at his words and shake my head. It’s odd how hard it is to truly hate him. The pain he caused throughout the last few months hasn’t disappeared, but right here, right now, he makes it easy to forget.

“Once we’ve nailed our interactions and we’re sure we can fool my grandmother, we’ll tell her. I don’t think it’ll be easy to break that engagement, but what else can she do when I’m already married? It might take a little bit of time, but it’ll be resolved. We just need to find a way to do it without damaging our relationship with the Ivanovs. In the meantime, I’ve asked our medical team to oversee the appointment of your grandmother’s nurses. I’m making it a top priority, so you don’t have to worry about a thing. Just play your role as my wife, and I’ll do my part too.”

I nod, my heart heavy. It won’t be easy to fool his grandmother, and we’ll have to put on a convincing act. There clearly is lust and chemistry between us, but love will be a lot harder to fake.

“We really should practice some more,” he whispers. “It’s been so long since I had a taste of you.” He cups my face, his thumb brushing over my

bottom lip as his gaze lowers. I inhale sharply when I feel him harden underneath me. “So tell me, wife. Will you let me kiss you?”

My heart skips a beat, and the clear longing in his eyes only fuels my own. I don’t think Luca has ever been this sweet to me. He’s a familiar stranger that I want to get to know, against better judgment.

My gaze drops to his lips, and he hardens even further underneath me, yet he doesn’t move. He just stares at me, waiting patiently. I lean in a little, my lips hovering over his. Months of endless jealousy and resentment, of wanting to lash out at him and hurt him the way he’s hurt me, of making him suffer for the way he blacklisted me. All of that, only for us to end up right here, right now, in each other’s arms.

“I think I hate you,” I whisper.

Luca’s hand threads through my hair, and he grips tightly. “Hate me as much as you want, baby. Resent me. Despise me for shackling you to me when I should’ve offered you unconditional help. Torment me for using you, Valentina, but don’t you fucking leave me.”

“I can’t,” I murmur as I close the distance between us, my lips brushing against his. “I can’t leave you.” I tried, yet here I am, in his bed. I give in and kiss him, taking what I’ve been wanting all along.

Luca groans and fists my hair, his touch rough as he forces my lips open, deepening our kiss. His hands roam over my body with such urgency that he’s almost got me believing that this is more than just simple lust.

“Fuck, Valentina,” he groans, his lips moving to my neck. I gasp and push against him, sitting up on my knees to put some distance between us.

His hands fall away, and he stares at me, his gaze heated. “Stop,” I whisper, my thoughts in turmoil. “I… we need to work tomorrow, and it’s late.”

He sighs and gently brushes his knuckles over my cheek. “Okay, Mrs. Windsor,” he tells me, the edges of his lips turning up into a small smile.

I move off him and lie down in bed, my heart racing. I’ve never felt this conflicted. The way he makes me feel is so unlike anything I’ve ever felt before. There’s no denying that I want him, yet his every touch fills me with heartache.

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Chapter Twenty-Seven

LUCA

I stare at my wife through the glass wall in my office, taking in her beauty. She was gone by the time I woke up this morning, depriving me of an experience I'd been looking forward to. I've always hated having people in my personal space, but I'm curious what it'd be like to wake up with her. She has no idea that I fantasized about the way her hair would spread all over my pillows for *months*.

Valentina got to the office long before I did, and I can't help but wonder if she's avoiding me. I suppose yesterday's events are catching up to her, and realization is dawning. I run a hand through my hair, equally uncertain what this marriage will look like.

That horrible outfit she wore last night, paired with the fact that she was out of the house before I even woke up, spoke volumes. She wants distance

and I should be grateful for it, but the more she runs, the more I want to chase her. I want her moaning my name the way she did in that gazebo in the vineyard. I want her begging for me until every bad memory I created fades away.

I sit up when I notice Theo Miller walking toward her desk, looking flustered. What the fuck is he doing here? The top floor is reserved for me, our executive team, and the board. What reason could he possibly have to be here? Have they kept in touch since that date they tried to go on?

He leans against her desk, and she smiles up at him when she should be telling him to fuck off. Theo says something to her, and she laughs. The mere fucking sight of her makes my heart skip a beat. My wife is unnecessarily beautiful, and it irritates me that I'm not the only one who notices.

I glance at my pocket watch and grit my teeth. Three minutes. That's all the time I'm giving her to send him away before I intervene.

The minutes trickle down, and with each passing second, my irritation increases. I rise to my feet at the three-minute mark, fucking fuming. Why the fuck is she still laughing with him like that?

I walk out of my office, and she looks up, her expression sobering. It's like just seeing me sucks all the joy out of her, and I fucking hate it. Meanwhile, Theo looks at me in surprise and pushes off her desk, the smile melting off his face. "Looks like I'm interrupting something," I say, my voice far calmer than I feel. Valentina has the decency to look somewhat embarrassed, and she averts her gaze. "What exactly has you two laughing like that?"

I feel like an irritating teacher, and it pisses me off that she brings out the worst in me. When have I ever cared about a woman I'm seeing laughing with someone else? This is a first for me, and I hate the way it feels. My wife turns me into a childish, petty, fucking fool, and there's not a thing I can do about it.

Valentina clears her throat and looks up at me, giving me one of those irritating smiles when she gave the fucker next to her such genuine ones just moments ago. "It's nothing," she tells me, her tone as cold as it usually is. "Theo just came to hand me a report I'd asked for."

"Why?" I snap. "If there's an issue with your email, you should be speaking to IT," I tell him, my eyes on the documents on Valentina's desk. What kind of bullshit excuse is this? Who even prints reports anymore?

Theo cups the back of his neck, clearly embarrassed, and Valentina rises to her feet. She shoots me an annoyed look, and that just infuriates me even further. Is she seriously trying to stand up for him?

"Can I have a word?" I ask my wife.

She nods and grabs a parcel from her desk. "Of course. This just came in for you, so I was about to bring it in."

I nod and extend my arm toward my office. Theo watches her as she walks away, and I raise my brow at him questioningly. He snaps out of it and nods at me before rushing off, unaware that he's now officially on my shit list. I'm going to watch him closely, and if he fucks up even remotely, I'm demoting or firing him. Probably the latter. I don't give a shit that he's one of our best assets. I gave him a chance after he took my wife out on a date. One chance is all he gets.

I walk into my office to find Valentina standing in front of my desk, my parcel in her hands. She's the only one authorized to sign for anything on my behalf, and I'm hoping that parcel is what I think it is. It arrived quicker than I was expecting.

I close the door behind me and press the button that makes my windows opaque. Valentina's eyes widen as I walk up to her, and she takes a step back, her hips hitting my desk.

I smile humorlessly as I lean in and press my palms on my desk on either side of her, caging her in. "You weren't there when I woke up. Avoiding me isn't going to help us put on a convincing act."

She looks away, her cheeks flushing. "Luca, we're at the office."

I smile at her and tip my head toward the opaque windows. "No one can see us, Valentina. You told me you didn't want anyone to know, and I'm abiding by your rule. Had it been up to me, Theo Miller would've already been made aware that you're *mine*."

She narrows her eyes at me. "I'm not yours, not truly."

I clench my jaw involuntarily. "It looks like there's a misunderstanding of some sort." I press my body flush against hers and bury a hand in her hair, tipping her face toward mine. "I was gentle with you last night because it was obvious you were nervous, but that is not how things are going to be between us. I told you in clear terms that I wanted your body. For the next three years, every fucking inch of you is mine, Valentina. Every smile you just gave Theo should've been *mine*. How are you going to compensate me for that?"

“You’re insane,” she whispers, her gaze dropping to my lips. One look, and my cock hardens. She’s fucking irresistible.

“Yes, wife,” I tell her. “We’ve long determined that you drive me completely fucking insane, so take some responsibility.”

I tighten my grip on her hair and pull her closer, taking her lips with an urgency I can’t suppress. She moans into my mouth and instantly wraps her arms around my neck, pushing herself up against me as she kisses me back. I don’t think I’ll ever get enough of her. She tells me she hates me, but her body says otherwise.

My hands wrap around her waist, and I lift her on top of my desk. Valentina spreads her legs for me, and I pull her close, my cock pushing against her as I kiss her. She drives me fucking mental. Never before has anyone been able to make me lose control the way she does.

My hand brushes over her thigh, and she pulls away, her eyes wide and her breathing irregular. “We have a meeting in a couple of minutes, Luca. We can’t be doing this.”

I pull away a little to look at her and shake my head. “A few minutes is all I need to make you come.”

She blushes and bites down on her bottom lip as my fingers slip between her legs. That needy look of hers instantly takes the edge off my anger. “The next time I see him hitting on you, we’re going to have a problem,” I tell her, my voice soft.

“I know,” she murmurs, her voice husky. “I’m sorry.”

I smile in satisfaction as I rip her tights right between her legs, the sound of fabric tearing fucking music to my ears. Valentina gasps, her gaze heated. I thought she’d protest, but she looks at me like she wants this more than I do. “Wet,” I whisper. “You soaked through this, baby, and all I’ve done is kiss you.”

Her eyes widen, and I smirk as I drag a finger over her covered pussy. “You’re my wife,” I tell her as I push the fabric aside, the feel of her slippery pussy nearly making me lose my mind. I groan and push two fingers into her, until I’ve got them pressed against her G-spot. “Did you forget that?”

She moans and shakes her head as she reaches for the lapels of my suit jacket. “No,” she breathes. “Of course not.” I press my thumb against her clit, and her eyes fall closed.

“No,” I tell her. “Look at me.”

She blinks, her cheeks flushing as her eyes find mine. “Good girl,” I whisper. “I like you best this way, baby. Your gaze filled with defiance even as your body yields to me. You belong to me, Valentina. You don’t have to like it, but you need to remember it.”

I swipe my thumb over her clit roughly, and she moans. There’s something so fucking sexy about seeing her this way. At last, it feels like she’s truly mine. “What would all of our employees think if they saw their precious Ice Queen with her legs spread wide on my desk, your skirt around your waist and your tights torn? What would Theo think if he saw how you’re riding my hand, how desperate I’ve got you? Perhaps I should show him, so he’ll realize that he doesn’t stand a fucking chance. Should I make those windows transparent?”

“*No*,” she moans, even as she pushes her hips up against me harder, chasing her orgasm. “Luca, you *can’t*.”

I chuckle, intensely fucking pleased by the sight she’s presenting me with. “Don’t worry, my love,” I murmur. “This sight is for my eyes only. No one else’s.”

Her pants come quicker, and I speed up my movements, getting her right to the edge. “Do you want to come for me, wife?”

She nods and yanks on my suit jacket, bringing me closer. I chuckle as my gaze drops to her lips.

“Tell me you’ll keep your distance from that fucker, and I’ll consider letting you come.”

Valentina nods, her eyes glazed over with desire. “I will, Luca. I swear.” I’ve never seen her so desperate, so fucking honest about her feelings. Watching her fall apart for me is rapidly becoming my latest addiction.

“Good girl,” I whisper. “You’re such a fucking good girl, Valentina. You deserve a reward, baby.”

She looks at me with such desperation that my heart skips a fucking beat. This is my every fantasy come true.

No.

This is better.

“Come for me,” I tell her as I increase the intensity on her clit, taking her right over the edge.

“*Luca*,” she moans as her pussy swallows my fucking fingers. How is my cock supposed to survive her? I already know that I’ll never be the same

again once I've had her. She'll hook me and turn me into even more of a fool than she already has.

I pull my fingers away and lift them to my lips, needing a taste of her. She moans as she watches me suck down on them. "Jealous?" I whisper. "Don't worry, baby. I'll give you my tongue soon enough."

Her eyes roam over my face, and she blushes fiercely as she lifts her hand, brushing away the lipstick stains she no doubt left on me.

I take a step away from her, intensely fucking pleased. My heart was unsettled seeing her with Theo, but my worries melted away the second I heard her moan my name.

"I'm serious," I tell her. "I don't want to see him hovering around you like that again. Either you put him in his place, or I will."

Valentina lowers herself off my desk and straightens out her clothes, clearly flustered. "It won't happen again," she tells me before throwing me a sweet, reassuring smile. There's a hint of shyness in her expression, and the way that makes my heart race is unreal.

It's fun watching my wife fight for composure — almost as fun as making her lose it. Two minutes. That's all it takes for her to paste that irritating professional smile back onto her face.

"This came for you," she says eventually, reaching for the parcel she brought in, her hands trembling. It's clear she's back in work-mode, and I'd better follow suit before I anger her.

I take my time opening the box, a smile finding its way onto my lips as the contents come into view. I hand her the documents, and she stares at them wide-eyed.

"New passport and driver's license," I explain. Just seeing the name *Valentina Windsor* on them brings me such fucking joy. "And this," I add, handing her a black credit card with the Windsor crest on it, "is a duplicate of my own credit card." That too, says *Valentina Windsor*. "For as long as you're married to me, you're welcome to spend however much you'd like, on whatever the hell you want."

She stares at the card, her expression unreadable. "You might want to hide our marriage, Valentina, and I may have consented to that, but you *are* my wife, and you'd better remember it. In private, you're Valentina *Windsor*. Just because we agreed that our marriage would be temporary, doesn't mean it isn't real. Don't you ever forget that."

She nods and clutches her new passport to her chest. I'd give the world to know what she's thinking right now. Countless women would do anything to take my last name, to be my wife. Yet the woman I actually married looks less than thrilled.

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Chapter Twenty-Eight

VALENTINA

"So this is where you've been hiding," Luca says, leaning in the doorway of his home office. "I suppose I should've known this is where I'd find you."

It's odd to find him wearing such casual clothes. I don't think I've ever seen him in gray sweatpants and a white t-shirt, and it looks oddly seductive. There's something about seeing Luca Windsor relaxed that makes my heart beat a little faster. I glance down at the ugly pajamas I'm wearing, feeling self-conscious about it tonight.

"Why didn't you wait for me? We could've gone home together."

I shake my head and snap out of my daze. "I drove to work myself, so I didn't want to leave my car behind." While I technically have a driver assigned to me, I always feel bad calling him. I much prefer to drive myself.

Luca pushes off the wall and walks toward me, his gaze intent. Something about that look in his eyes reminds me of the way he touched me today and the things he said.

You belong to me, Valentina. You don't have to like it, but you need to remember it.

He was treating me like an object again, like I'm one of his possessions, but somehow, I didn't mind it this time. I used to think that Luca was crazy, but it appears that the person who's slowly losing their sanity is *me*. How could I want him so desperately despite everything?

"What are you working on?" he asks. Luca pulls me off his desk chair and steals my spot before swiftly pulling me onto his lap. His arms wrap around me as he reaches for the mouse, his chin resting on top of my shoulder. "Expansion plans, huh?"

"*Luca*." I attempt to move off him, but he tightens his grip on me and keeps me in place.

"I'm sorry," he tells me as he tilts his face, his lips brushing against my neck.

I freeze, surprised. "What for?" I ask, my tone biting. "There are a multitude of things you should be apologizing for, so tell me. What are you sorry for?"

He chuckles and fully wraps his arms around me, embracing me. "I should've known you'd never let me off easy."

"Why should I?" I snap. "You don't do things halfheartedly, right? If you're going to apologize, do it properly."

I expected him to laugh it off, but instead he wraps his hands around my waist and repositions me in his lap so he can look at me. The unexpected remorse in his eyes renders me speechless for a moment, and I inhale sharply when he cups my face. My emotions have been entirely in turmoil for weeks now, even more so now than before. One moment, I'm angry at him, and the next moment, I can't contain my racing heart. He confuses me, and I hate the way he makes me feel. I don't like feeling so out of control.

"For starters, I'm sorry for not admitting that I was jealous of Joshua Rivera that day, at Ares and Raven's wedding. I saw you dance with him, and you laughed at something he said. That's all it took for my thoughts to fill with images of you with him. It drove me so crazy that I cut my dance with my grandmother short, just so I could pull you away from him. I wasn't ready to be honest about my motives back then, not even to myself

— so I lied, to both of us. The lies that left my lips that night cost us dearly, and this apology is months too late, but you deserve one nonetheless."

I stare at him in shock. There must have been a vein of truth in his words. He wouldn't have chosen those exact words if no part of him thought them to be true. He'd have accused me of corporate espionage and left it at that. He wouldn't have accused me of trying to become Joshua's mistress, would he? It's like his words that night were designed to cut deep.

"I'm also sorry about the way I treated you around Natalia. Words can't adequately describe how much guilt I felt whenever I saw you, especially when she was there. You were the one I wanted, and she was the one I thought I'd marry. I needed to put some distance between you and I, so I defaulted to treating you as nothing but an employee. I had to remind myself that's all you could ever be if I were to marry someone else, but at the same time, I couldn't truly let you go."

He sighs and lets his hand fall away. "I've been extremely selfish when it comes to you, Valentina. I know that. I pushed you away, and when you left, I punished you for it by blacklisting you and making it impossible for you to find another job. As if that wasn't bad enough, I tried to use your grandmother's disappearance to coerce you into this marriage. I know I've been acting fucking insane, and I know an apology isn't enough. I know all of that, yet here I am, asking you for your forgiveness nonetheless."

The torment in his gaze makes me feel conflicted. "Why now?"

He gently grabs a strand of my hair and wraps it around his finger. "I'm not sure. Perhaps it's because you told me that you think you hate me, or maybe it's because you looked bitter when I gave you your new identification documents today. I don't know why I suddenly feel the need to apologize to you, Valentina. All I really know is that I don't want to spend the next three years of our lives with so much standing between us. I don't want us to spend three years together with festering wounds that only seem momentarily forgotten when we lose ourselves in passion instead."

He pauses for a moment and looks away. "The one thing my parents always told me mattered most when it came to family was communication. This isn't easy for me, Valentina, but you're my wife now, so I want to try. I know we can't start off with a clean slate, but I want to do what I can to take away the past's power over us. I can't just sit back and let it define what the next few years will look like."

Luca never brings up his parents, and I know just mentioning them is hard for him. “Communication?” I repeat. “My family doesn’t communicate at all. I grew up in an environment where apologies were never given, and feelings were never acknowledged. But that isn’t a cycle I should continue. It isn’t what I want for myself, and you’re right to say that the past shouldn’t determine the future.” I pause then, hesitating. “I accept your apology, Luca, but that doesn’t mean it hurts any less. Can you acknowledge that much, at least?”

He nods. “Of course,” he says, exhaling slowly. His fingertips brush over my temple, and for a moment, he looks as lost as I feel.

“You took me for granted,” I murmur, my voice breaking. “You always have. You still do, and there’s nothing I can do about it. You play around with my life and my feelings like everything is just a game to you, and each time I thought we stood on equal footing, that you respected me, you turned around and proved me wrong. I’m not mad about Joshua or Natalia. I’m hurt that you treated me so badly and then had the gall to jeopardize everything I’ve ever worked for. I always put you first, but when it was time for you to do the same for me, you let me down.” I don’t think he could possibly understand what my job meant to me, to my family. I felt like I gave him my all for years, and all of my hard work and loyalty meant nothing to him. He doesn’t respect me, and he made me feel like I’m nothing but a pawn to him in an elaborate game that I don’t even know the rules of.

Luca cups the back of my head gently, his gaze sincere. “I won’t let you down again,” he tells me. “I can’t promise you that I won’t make any more mistakes, Valentina. But I promise you that from this day forward, I’ll put you first.”

I nod, and one of the many knots in my heart finally unravels. I never realized something as simple as an apology could make me feel so much better.

“Do you think we could go back to the way we used to be?” Luca asks, his voice soft. “Today, when you looked at me with passion in your eyes… fuck, baby. It’s the first time in months that you seemed to trust me. Please trust me with more than just your body, Valentina. I promise that I won’t let you down again.”

He’s right. We can’t let the past have so much power over us, but I have no intention of forgetting it either. I look into his eyes, the sincerity in them

making me cautiously hopeful. “If you want my forgiveness, you’ll have to earn it.”

He nods and presses a kiss to my forehead, his touch lingering. “I will,” he promises.

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Chapter Twenty-Nine

VALENTINA

LUCIFER

don’t come home yet. Give me 45 minutes.

I FROWN AND PAUSE BY THE FRONT DOOR AS I STARE AT THE TEXT MESSAGE Luca sent me just now. He knew that I went to see Abuela after work and that I’d be home late. Is he trying to make sure I don’t walk in on something I shouldn’t see? Something about this message doesn’t sit well with me.

My thoughts start to spiral, and my hand shakes as I press my thumb to the scanner. Even if he’s got his family over, that’d be no reason to keep me away. It’s not at all uncommon for me to be working from his house. They wouldn’t be surprised to find me here.

So who did he bring home? Natalia? My stomach twists painfully as I walk into the house, all reason fading away. I convinced myself that I didn't care about Luca, that I resented him for everything he put me through, yet the mere thought of him with someone else makes me want to take back every single word that pushed him away. *Please. Don't let this be a repeat of that day.*

My heart aches as I follow the sound of Luca's voice, part of me wondering if it'd be best to stay away. I'm not someone who avoids tough situations, yet somehow, I want to right now.

"Fuck," I hear Luca mutter. "Fuck, fuck, *fuck*. Where did it go wrong?"

I walk into the kitchen to find him standing all by himself, surrounded by the biggest mess I've ever seen. Relief rushes through me as I take a shaky breath. What was I thinking? "Luca?"

He whirls around, revealing a YouTube video playing on his tablet behind him. "Fuck, *Valentina*," he says, surprised. "Shit. I thought I told you not to come home yet. Why…"

He groans and turns back around, his movements frantic as he tries to lock his tablet. I bite back a smile as I take in the situation. "Luca, what is going on?"

"Fucking hell," he groans as he buries his face in his hands. I've never seen him as flustered as he is right now, and it's oddly heartwarming.

I bite back a smile as I walk up to him and glance at the ingredients that he absolutely butchered. "What is it you're trying to make?" I ask, confused.

Luca looks at me, his expression portraying utter defeat. I've never seen him look quite so disappointed before. He reaches for me, his touch gentle as he brushes his knuckles over my cheek. "I told you I'd earn your forgiveness, but I wasn't sure where to start. I wanted to do something for you and remembered the food you brought to the office a few months ago, the taquitos your grandmother made you. They seemed to make you happy, so I searched through all of your favorite YouTube food channels to find a recipe." He glances at the mess, his expression tormented. "It looked a lot easier than it was."

A soft chuckle escapes my lips as I reach for him and cup his face. "You did this for me?"

He shakes his head, his gaze filled with disappointment. "No, baby. I didn't do anything but make a fucking mess. I can't even get this right.

When it comes to you, all I do is fuck up, over and over again, no matter how hard I try."

My eyes roam over his face, and my heart skips a beat. "You didn't fuck up," I whisper as I move closer to him. My hand slides around the back of his neck, and I rise to my tiptoes. He looks at me with such vulnerability and hope that I can't help but smile.

My gaze drops to his lips, and he tilts his head a little, as though he wants a kiss but won't demand one. "Valentina," he whispers, his tone pleading.

I bridge the distance between us and pull him closer, my lips finding his. He groans as he cups the back of my head, his fingers threading through my hair, his tight grip betraying his desperation. The way he wants me will never get old. No one has ever made me feel as wanted as Luca does.

He forces my lips apart with his tongue and kisses me slowly, deeply, his touch filled with more than just passion. When he kisses me like this, it feels like he's making me silent promises he doesn't dare voice.

He groans when my hand slips underneath his t-shirt, my fingers brushing over the ridges of his abs. I pull his t-shirt up, and he grabs the edges of it as he helps me get rid of it. A soft sigh escapes my lips when I lay my eyes on him. "Like what you see?" he murmurs.

I nod, and he wraps his hands around my waist. His gaze is heated as he lifts me on top of the kitchen counter and spreads my legs, impatience flashing through his eyes. "You truly do drive me insane, Valentina. You make me act in ways I never thought I would. What are you doing to me?"

My hands slide up his chest until I've got them entwined around the back of his neck. "You drive me just as crazy," I admit as I wrap my legs around him. I'm weak when it comes to him, and he knows it. "When I'm around you, I hardly recognize myself."

His lips hover over mine, and he smiles as he kisses the edge of my lip. "Good," he whispers. "I want to own a part of you that no one else gets. Even now that I've made you my wife, I want more. I'm worried I'll never get enough of you."

I thread my hand through his hair and grip tightly as I kiss him with all I've got, my heart oddly at ease. I'm tired of fighting with both him and myself. I don't want to argue with Luca, and I hate this distance between us. I miss him, and the way we used to be.

He pulls away a little and stares at me, his expression so pained that I can't help but reach for him. I press my index finger in between his brows and smile. "What has you frowning like that?"

He shakes his head. "I just want you to keep looking at me this way. I don't think you realize what it does to me when your eyes are filled with contempt. It kills me to know that I have no one but myself to blame for it. I want to make it right, but I don't know how."

My gaze roams over his face, taking in the frustration and sincerity. "You've treated me differently from the moment we signed the paperwork, Luca. When you're like this, it's almost like you're an entirely different person. I can't… I can't stay mad at you when you act this way." I hesitate and cup his face. For years, I resented the way my mother clung to the hatred she feels for my father. I blamed her for holding onto negativity when there was so much good in her life. I always said that I didn't want to follow in her footsteps, but isn't that exactly what I'm doing? Isn't this a cycle I swore I'd escape from?

"A clean slate," I whisper. "Let's try it, Luca."

His eyes widen a fraction, and his gaze roams over my face, searching, almost as though he isn't sure he believes me. "Does that mean you forgive me?"

I nod. "Yeah," I whisper. "I do. I forgive you, but don't you ever take me for granted again. Don't make me feel used, and don't treat me like I'm a mere tool, a resource, an *object*."

He grabs my chin and drops his forehead to mine. "I won't," he murmurs. "Not outside of bed, anyway. When it comes to your body, you very much are mine, baby. I won't compromise on that."

A surprised chuckle escapes my lips, and my cheeks flush. Luca smirks at me and presses a sweet kiss to my cheek, his touch lingering. "Don't worry," he whispers. "In return, every part of me is yours. I'll let you use me however you want, wife."

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Chapter Thirty

VALENTINA

I smile as I lean back in my desk chair and scroll through the photos I took with Abuela. I've been going to see her every other day after work, and she seems to be doing so much better. Her new nurses are kind and incredibly professional, going as far as sending me hourly updates about her. It's such a relief to know that she's in good hands. I owe it all to Luca and his team.

I smirk and bite down on my lip as my thoughts turn to him. He truly seems to be trying his best to be kinder, to repent for the pain he caused. When he told me he'd earn my forgiveness, I thought it was a pretty but empty promise. I should've known better. He truly doesn't do anything halfheartedly. He's been patient, never asking for more than I'm willing to give, and he's gentle with me in a way he never used to be.

I’m snapped out of my thoughts when the light on my desk phone starts to flash red, indicating a problem. I look into Luca’s office in confusion, but he’s immersed in his work, not a single hint of distress on his face.

Moments later, I hear the sound of heels clicking behind me. My stomach twists when I see Natalia walk toward Luca’s office, an excited grin on her face. Who let her up here?

“Excuse me, Ms. Ivanov,” I say through gritted teeth. “I can’t let you through.” Just seeing her fills me with a strange kind of jealousy. Technically, she’s still Luca’s fiancée, and I hate that I can’t just stop her the way I want to.

She chuckles and brushes past me as she storms into Luca’s office. I follow her in, uncertain how to handle her. “Darling!” she says. “Surprise!”

Unfamiliar anger grips me as I stand by the door, watching as she rushes up to him. Darling? *Darling*? Fury brews within me as Luca pushes off his chair, his brows raised. He looks past her, at me, a confused expression on his face. It’s clear he wasn’t expecting her, and that knowledge takes the edge off my anger, but it doesn’t appease it.

Natalia wraps her arms around his neck, and Luca takes a step back, putting some distance between them immediately. He shoots me a panicked look, but I merely lean back against the wall and cross my arms.

“I saw that you went to Laurier,” she says excitedly, referencing a famous reclusive jeweler. “So you got me an engagement ring, huh? I don’t want a grand proposal! We’re already engaged, darling. Just give me the ring.”

He runs a hand through his hair and sighs. “Where did you see that?”

She grins, and for a moment I feel helpless. She looks so beautiful when she smiles like that. I’ve never been one to compare myself to other women, but she makes me feel inferior. “The Herald reported that you were seen going into Laurier.”

Luca grabs his phone and groans. “Fuck.” He looks up at me, and the remorse in his eyes makes my stomach drop. I’m not sure what’s been reported, but it can’t be good.

“Natalia,” he says, his tone far too patient for my liking. “It looks like there’s been a misunderstanding of some sort. I’ll explain everything to you soon. For the time being, I need to ask you to leave.”

She pouts, and it irritates me how pretty she looks. I have no doubt she’s used to charming men, and Luca is probably no different. I was the

convenient choice, but she's the one he'd rather have in his bed. The thought of them together makes me feel sick, and I involuntarily ball my fists.

"But I came all the way here to see you. Besides, my dad wanted me to speak to you about the merger."

"I'm working. Now isn't a good time. I'll have my driver send you back, and I'll give your father a call later." He sounds concerned, and I look away, a hint of guilt gnawing at me. I know he doesn't have any feelings for her, and offending the Ivanovs any further won't do him any favors, but I'm still irrationally angry.

Natalia's eyes flash as she turns around and walks back out of his office, her gaze focusing on me for a moment before she slams the door closed behind her. There's no way he can call the engagement off without informing his grandmother first, but I wish he could. I wish he'd just told her that they're through.

I watch Luca and clench my jaw. "Would you like me to make a dinner reservation for you two, *darling*? Or shall I send her another hundred roses?"

Luca bites back a smile, his gaze suddenly far warmer than it was before. "Come here, Valentina."

I push off the wall and walk toward him, my anger boiling over. He chuckles when I reach him and grabs my waist, lifting me onto his desk with ease. He looks into my eyes as he spreads my legs, making my skirt ride up.

"Luca!"

He smiles at me as he sits back down and pulls his desk chair closer, until he's got my legs on either side of him. "So this is what it takes for you to finally start acting like my wife, huh? Don't be mad, baby," he murmurs, his hands wrapping around my hips.

Heat rushes to my cheeks and I glance behind us, at the glass wall that overlooks my desk. This floor is quiet, but all it would take for us to get caught is for someone to walk this way.

"I didn't know she'd show up here. Just a few more days until we're telling Grandma about us. Can you hold on for me until then?"

I look back at him, my heart racing. "Why would I be mad?" I ask him, sounding awfully mad for a woman pretending not to be.

He laughs and leans back to watch me, his hands sliding down to my thighs. My black lace panties are exposed, and the way his gaze darkens when his eyes settle on them makes me squirm involuntarily. After the way he tore my tights the other day, I've taken to wearing thigh-high stockings, and the look in his eyes tells me that he's a big fan of them.

"Aren't you going to ask me about the rumors?"

"What rumors?" I ask, nervous.

"The ones about me visiting Laurier."

I look away, my heart clenching painfully. I don't want to think about him picking a ring for Natalia. If The Herald is reporting on it now, he must have been photographed fairly recently. It won't have been for me, since we got married so abruptly. Besides, he'd never get me a ring from Laurier. The Windsors shop there exclusively for heirloom pieces. He wouldn't buy me a Laurier ring knowing that we won't last a lifetime.

"It's true, you know?" he murmurs. "I did go to Laurier."

His eyes find mine, and I try my hardest to hide the pain his words inflict. Luca smirks and cups my face for a moment as he shakes his head. Then he pulls his hand away and reaches for his drawer. I inhale sharply when he takes out a black box with the Laurier crest on it.

"The Herald got one little detail wrong, though. I didn't go there for an engagement ring. I went to buy wedding rings."

He opens the box, and my eyes widen when I see the huge diamond ring and the plain gold band beside it. "Three diamonds," he says, picking up the ring. "One for each year you promised me. I know I fucked up in the past, and I haven't always treated you right, but let me rectify my mistakes, baby. I truly am a terrible boss, but I'll do everything in my power to be a good husband for you."

He grabs my hand and slides it into my ring finger. It's a perfect fit, but it's too much for someone like me. This kind of ring… it's meant for someone who truly could be part of the Windsor family.

"Here," Luca says, holding up his ring. "Put this on me. We didn't get to do this during our wedding ceremony, but that doesn't mean we won't do it at all."

"We can't," I blurt out, taking my ring off. "We agreed we wouldn't tell anyone but our families about our marriage, so we can't be seen wearing wedding rings."

Luca's expression darkens when I place the ring on his desk, and he clenches his jaw as he places his own ring beside mine. He chuckles humorlessly and lets a finger trail down my thigh, until he reaches my ankle. A soft gasp escapes my lips when he lifts my leg over his shoulder and brushes his lips over my inner thigh, right above my stocking. "You're so scared to wear something that'll mark you as mine," he says, his tone soft but dangerous. "I want to be gentle with you, baby. I want to be patient with you and treat you right, but you make it so fucking hard. You make me want to own you, brand you. You're *my wife*, and it still doesn't feel like you're mine. Why is it that you insist on driving me fucking wild?"

Luca kisses my skin before sucking down on it harshly, over and over again, leaving countless kiss marks on my thigh as he works his way up. I bite down on my lip and thread a hand through his hair, gripping tightly as I try my hardest to keep my moans in.

"Who are you trying to hide me from, huh?" he murmurs, his lips brushing over my lace underwear. "You told me you forgave me, but you reject me at every turn. Do you do it because you know it drives me insane?" He kisses me straight through my panties, and I gasp, my hips bucking involuntarily.

He chuckles and wraps his teeth around the fabric, pushing it aside. "It looks like you need a reminder of who you belong to," he whispers against my skin. "Maybe I've been a bit too kind, a bit too patient. That ends here."

"Luca," I warn, "anyone could walk by and see us."

He looks up, his eyes flashing with anger. "Do I look like I give a fuck?" he asks me, before grabbing my other leg and pulling that over his shoulder too. He yanks me closer until he's got me leaning back on his desk, my legs wide open for him.

Luca looks into my eyes as his tongue brushes over my pussy, and my eyes fall closed.

"No," he tells me. "You know the rules. Look at me and watch me fuck you with my tongue. Watch, and burn this image into your mind. Even without a wedding ring, you belong to me, Valentina Windsor."

He holds my hips tightly as his tongue flicks over my clit, his rhythm steady as he slowly drives me insane. He chuckles against my skin. "Delicious, and so fucking wet. Your body knows who it belongs to, but your mind needs a reminder."

He pushes his tongue into me, brushing over a spot that has me begging for more. “Luca,” I groan. “*Please*.”

His tongue draws circles around my clit until he’s got me panting and delirious. The way he keeps me on the edge is unfair, and I tighten my grip on his hair, pushing my hips against his face harder.

I nearly lose it when he pushes two fingers into me and presses them against my G-spot, his tongue flicking against my clit. Every time he gets me close, he slows down, intent on punishing me.

“Please, Luca. *Please*.”

He pulls away a little to look up at me. “Who do you belong to?”

“I’m yours,” I swear. “Only yours.”

“Good girl,” he whispers, before sucking down on my clit, taking me right back to the edge.

“This pussy,” he whispers against my clit. “Whose is it?”

I pull on his hair, desperate. “It’s yours, Luca. Every single part of me is yours, I promise.”

He smiles and finally gives me what he had me begging for, making me come on his tongue at last. The sounds of my moans fill up his office, but I don’t have it in me to care.

He kisses my thigh as I come down from my high, my breathing erratic and my clothes a mess. He smiles up at me in that sweet and genuine way that has my heart skipping a beat, and I can’t help but look away. He’s rough with me whenever we’re intimate, but outside of that, he treats me like I’m someone precious. It’s crazy, and it’s addictive.

“I’ll buy necklace chains for us,” he murmurs against my skin. “Wear your wedding ring on that if you must, but one way or another, I want it on your body. Don’t make me punish you again, Valentina. Stop pushing my buttons.”

I nod, my heart racing. If this is the kind of punishment he doles out, I may just have to anger him again.

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Chapter Thirty-One

VALENTINA

I walk into Luca's dressing room and pause mid-step when I find him putting on a shirt, his chest and abs exposed. There's something infinitely sexy about watching Luca get dressed.

His eyes meet mine through the large mirror, and for a moment, it becomes impossible to move. The way he looks at me makes my heart race, and I want more of it. He hasn't looked at me like that since I refused to wear the wedding ring he bought me.

For the longest time, I was certain that I didn't mean a thing to Luca, but it's becoming clear that I don't know as much about him as he led me to believe. I always thought I was one of very few people who understood how his mind works, but I don't.

"Come here, Valentina," he says, turning around to face me.

I walk up to him, the red skirt I'm wearing swaying with each step I take. Luca's eyes roam over my body, a satisfied smile on his face. This is something I'll never get enough of. He always looks at me like I'm the most beautiful woman he's ever seen, when I know that I'm far from it.

Luca's eyes drop to the necklace around my neck, and he loops his finger through it, a frown making its way onto his face. He pulls on the chain, and I gasp as I move closer, fearing he'll break it. "Wear it today, at least," he murmurs, his voice tinged with disappointment. "Or will you have my grandmother believe that I didn't even give you a wedding ring?"

I glance down at the ring dangling from my necklace and nod. "I'll wear it if you put it on me," I murmur, the words escaping my lips thoughtlessly.

Some of the frost in Luca's eyes melts, and he smiles at me. "Oh yeah?" he whispers as he undoes my necklace, letting the ring slip off it. He takes my hand and places the ring at the tip of my finger before raising his head to look at me. "Like this?" he asks as he pushes it onto my finger slowly, his gaze filled with longing.

I nod and lift my free hand to his face, the tips of my fingers brushing over his temple tenderly. "I won't take it off again unless we're at the office, okay? I promise. I didn't think it meant anything to you, Luca."

He lifts my hand to his lips and gently kisses my fingers. "It does," he whispers. "It does mean something to me, wife."

He looks at me with an unreadable expression and sighs. I wish I could decipher that gaze of his. It looks a whole lot like longing, but how could it be, when I'm standing right here?

I reach for him and let my fingers trail up his abs, over his chest, until I reach the necklace around his neck. I undo it and let his wedding ring slip off, my heart beating in a strange rhythm when he continues to look at me that way.

I push his ring onto his finger and let my thumb brush over it. "I think I get it now," I murmur, satisfaction filling me as I stare at his ring. I entwine our fingers and lift my face to look at him. "I love the way that looks on you, but even more so, I love the way it feels."

He smiles at me then and gently brushes my hair behind my ear. "Feels like I'm yours, doesn't it?"

"Yeah," I whisper.

"Good," he tells me as he threads his hand through my hair and pulls me closer. "Because I am."

Luca tilts my face and lowers his lips to mine. My eyes flutter closed, and he kisses me tenderly, leisurely. Something is different about this kiss. It's more intimate somehow, and it brings a strange ache to my heart. I rise to my tiptoes and kiss him harder, needing a little more. I'm not sure what I'm asking for exactly, but I want him to take away the sudden unease I feel.

He drops his forehead to mine and inhales shakily. "I don't want to stop, but we're going to be late, baby."

Luca pulls away, and my reluctance must be obvious because he smirks and presses a kiss to my forehead before turning back to the mirror. "Help me convince my grandmother today, my love, and I'll reward you the second we get home."

I smile and nod at him, my eyes on his through the mirror. I watch him as he buttons up his shirt, my heart beating loudly. Luca Windsor… there's something about him that's becoming harder and harder to resist. When I married him, I was certain my heart would be safe from him, but I'm starting to realize that I miscalculated the risk in this arrangement.

Luca offers me his arm, and together we walk out of the house I've come to consider my home. Today we're officially informing his family of our marriage, and I'm not sure how to feel about it. I'm scared Sierra and Raven will be mad at me for keeping it from them, and I'm worried Grandma Anne will be disappointed in me. There's a lot at stake for Luca, but I stand to lose a lot today too.

"It'll be okay," he promises me as we get into the car, but I struggle to believe that as we make our way to Raven's fashion show. It's the first big public appearance that all of the Windsors will be present at, and even Dion is flying back for it. The idea of them being horrified with the news consumes my thoughts, and I look down at my feet as we walk into the venue.

I can feel Luca's gaze on me, but I struggle to raise my head. I'm terrified of letting down the Windsors after everything they've done for me.

Luca entwines our fingers as we make our way to the front row, where his grandmother and a few of his siblings are already seated. "Grandma," Luca says as he sits down next to her before helping me into the seat next to him. "Valentina and I got married," he says simply. "I'll need you to cancel my engagement."

I stare at him wide-eyed, shocked that *that's* how he chose to announce the news. I was expecting more finesse. I thought we'd sit through the show and announce our marriage at dinner afterwards, but he looks relaxed, as though his announcement isn't as astonishing as his siblings' faces make it seem. Sierra stares at us openmouthed, and then she narrows her gaze at me and shakes her head, a smile finding its way onto her lips. Relief washes over me when I realize that she isn't mad at me.

Meanwhile, Grandma Anne glances from me to him and shakes her head. "We'll see about that," she says, turning away from us to look at the stage instead. I can feel her disapproval, and it kills me. She gave me a chance when I barely even believed in myself, and she's supported me throughout the years, siding with me each time Luca tried to fire me. I feel like I'm betraying her in the worst way, and I bite down on my lip in an effort to hold back the tears that are gathering in my eyes.

I never should've agreed to marry Luca knowing how much this would hurt her. The arrangement with the Ivanovs is so valuable to the family, and I should've respected that. I never should've interfered where I don't belong. Ultimately, I should've found a different way to gather the money I needed for my grandmother. It wouldn't have been easy, but perhaps a bank loan would've been an option. Anything is better than hurting the one woman who believed in me when no one else did.

Luca brings our joined hands to his lips, distracting me. He kisses the back of my hand tenderly before lifting his face, a sweet smile on his lips. "It's okay," he murmurs. "Everything is going to be okay."

I look into his eyes, struggling to believe his words. He leans in and presses a kiss to my cheek, and I let my eyes flutter closed for a moment as I take a deep breath.

"Smile," he whispers, his eyes twinkling. "Or the jig is up."

He leans in further, his nose brushing past mine for a moment, before his lips land on mine. He kisses me softly and leisurely, his lips lingering when he pulls away.

Luca drops his forehead to mine, his breathing ragged.

"How are you such a good actor?" I whisper, "Is any of it real? The kindness you show me, is that just how you think you should treat your wife? Are you fooling me too?"

He presses a kiss to my cheek, close to my ear. "You tell me, Valentina. *Is it* real?"

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Chapter Thirty-Two

LUCA

"Explain," my grandmother says, her hands clasped in her lap. She looks every inch the sophisticated matriarch, right down to the tense expression on her face.

I wrap my arm around my wife's shoulder in a silent effort to reassure her. The two of us are seated in my grandmother's sitting room, neither one of us sure what to expect of the interrogation that's about to ensue. Normally, Valentina performs extremely well under pressure, but not today. I underestimated how much my grandmother means to her.

"What can I say?" I murmur, tightening my grip on my wife. "I fell in love, and it only seemed right to follow my heart. I was scared that I'd regret it for the rest of my life if I let Valentina walk away, when it was clear that there's no one else I could imagine myself growing old with."

Grandma looks between the two of us, her gaze suspicious. “You said you got married?” she asks, her voice soft. I thought I knew my grandmother well, but in this moment, I’m finding it impossible to read her.

I reach for the documents I put in my suit jacket’s inner pocket and hand them to her. “This is a copy of our marriage certificate,” I tell her. “But you’re welcome to call Mayor Kingston to verify that he did, in fact, marry us.”

She stares at the papers in disbelief before glancing back at us, anger making its way onto her face when she realizes it isn’t a ruse. “What were you thinking?” she asks, exasperated. “And you, Val? How could you do this without even speaking to me?”

She slaps the papers onto the coffee table and looks away for a moment, her disappointment apparent. It’s near unnoticeable, but my wife starts to tremble and clasps her hands together, her gaze downcast. I pull her closer protectively and pin my grandmother down with a stare.

“We weren’t thinking,” I admit. “We’re in love, Grandma. Can you really blame us? Valentina and I were years in the making, and you above everyone else, should be aware of that.”

She glares at me and shakes her head. “I’m supposed to believe that you’re suddenly in love with Val after tormenting her for *years*? You’re forced to get engaged to Natalia Ivanov, and all of a sudden you decide you’re in love with the woman you couldn’t stand for years?”

My wife flinches, and I grit my teeth, guilt rendering me speechless. She’s right, of course. For years, I did resent Valentina, and I hear the implication loud and clear. She thinks I’m using Valentina, and she isn’t wrong.

“I don’t believe for a second that you two are in love with each other. Val,” she says, her tone harsh, “tell me honestly. Is he threatening you?”

My wife shakes her head and looks up remorsefully. “I’m sorry, Grandma Anne,” she says, her voice trembling. “It’s true. I… we’re in love with each other. I know that our decision to get married was rash, but Luca is right. We were years in the making.”

Grandma crosses her arms and raises her brows. “Pray tell,” she says. “What was it that made you suddenly realize you’re in love, after years of barely tolerating each other?”

Valentina blushes and looks down for a moment. “It was on Ares and Raven’s wedding day,” she murmurs. “Um… Luca… I… well, something

happened that made us realize that… I mean…”

“I kissed her,” I admit. “I kissed her that day, and things haven’t been the same since.”

Grandma frowns, the gears in her mind clearly turning. “That was months ago, and I vividly remember that the two of you barely spoke to each other after that day. Val even stopped coming home for dinner.”

My wife looks down at her lap, and I grab her hand, holding it in mine. “Neither of us was sure how to handle the change in our relationship, but then you announced my engagement to Natalia.”

Grandma frowns and glances at my wife. “Is that when you realized you were in love with Luca?” she asks, her tone gentler now.

Valentina shakes her head. “That’s when I quit my job. I realized then that I couldn’t stand being around him if he was to marry someone else. The thought of him falling for Natalia tormented me, and I knew that witnessing him with her would tear me apart.”

Grandma’s eyes widen. “You quit your job? How come I never heard of that happening?”

“I didn’t report it to you because I had no intention of letting her go.”

Grandma smiles then. It’s only for a split-second, but it’s a real smile, nonetheless. “So I am to believe that you two fell in love that way and rushed into marriage?”

“Valentina has been by my side for eight years, Grandma. Why would I want to wait even one more second, when not making her mine could result in me losing her forever? With the engagement, there was only one way for me to prove my commitment to her.”

“Marriage,” Grandma says, nodding. She falls silent for a moment, her gaze drifting between the two of us. She wags her finger at us and shakes her head. “I don’t believe the two of you for a second, but the fact that you got married is undeniable.”

She leans forward and sighs, her eyes falling closed for a moment. “I’m freezing all of your family assets, Luca,” she says. “Not only did you get married behind my back, you also put us at risk of making an enemy out of what would have been a strong ally. It’s going to be hard to break off your engagement.”

Valentina glances at me, concerned, but I merely smile. I haven’t used the family assets in years. I make more than enough money of my own, and Grandma should be well aware of that.

“Very well.”

“If,” Grandma says. “*If* the two of you are still married in three years, I’ll grant you your inheritance.” She holds up her finger, annoyance flashing through her eyes. “And only because it’s Val. Had your brought home anyone else, that would’ve been the end of you.”

I nod and breathe a sigh of relief. It was a gamble, but I knew the way she favors Valentina would work in my benefit.

“However, this arrangement doesn’t come without its own set of rules.”

I gently rub my thumb over the back of my wife’s hand. I knew she’d be nervous, but I’ve never seen her this way. I’ve watched her hold meetings with world leaders and billionaires without so much as flinching, yet she cowers in front of my grandmother. It’s both surprising and endearing all at once.

“The two of you must truly share a life, so naturally, you must share a home and a bed. You cannot have different bedrooms or lead lives separate from each other, and you may not spend more than three consecutive nights apart for the next three years.”

I try my hardest to act surprised, when truthfully, Ares already warned me about the rules.

“You also must remain faithful to each other, Luca and Val. If, for even a second, I suspect that either of you is disloyal or unfaithful, or that the two of you are in fact attempting to trick me, I’ll take away your inheritance, Luca. Val, if this were to occur, I’ll fire you at once and I’ll ensure you’re blacklisted. You will never work in *any* of the industries we operate in.”

Valentina looks up sharply, a hint of fear in her gaze. I lift our joined hands to my lips and kiss the back of her hand, quietly reassuring her. Neither she nor I would ever cheat. That isn’t something I’m worried about with her.

“For the time being, I ask that you keep your marriage confidential,” Grandma says, her eyes falling closed. “It won’t be good if the Ivanovs find out in this manner. Let’s handle this with tact.”

She narrows her eyes. “And if the engagement is dissolved and I subsequently find out that this was all a trick, both of you will pay for it.”

“Understood,” I tell her, not in the least concerned. My contract with Valentina will last a minimum of three years, so none of her worries will come to pass. I’ll successfully receive my inheritance, and Valentina will receive all the funds she could possibly need.

I glance at my wife, taking in the guilt she tries to hide so hard. Three years. She and I just need to get through the next three years together without exposing our pretense.

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Chapter Thirty-Three

LUCA

I stare at my phone as it rings, unsure what to do. By now, Natalia would have been informed that the Windsors are stepping away from the engagement and merger, but I should have taken a moment to break our engagement personally. I may not like her, but she's deserving of common courtesy.

Then again, I was never consulted when this engagement was arranged, so why should I be the one to end it? If I'm truly honest with myself, though, the reason I'm rejecting her calls is that look Valentina gets in her eyes whenever Natalia comes up. I've hurt her enough, and my wife deserves better. We managed to make up after we told my family about us, and she truly is wearing her wedding ring a bit more often, but there's still more distance between us than I'd like. It's odd how I still miss her, even

now that she's my wife. The only times she lowers her guard is when I have my hands on her body, and I want more. I want her smiles, her laughter. I want all of her.

Valentina walks into my office, and I sit up, a tinge of guilt running down my spine as I glance at my phone. "Luca," she says, her expression guarded. "Natalia called the office and requested a meeting with you. I granted it. She should be here in about ten minutes."

"You *what*? Why the fuck would you do that?"

Valentina pushes her hair behind her ear and looks down. "Because had it been me, I'd want to speak to you too. If what you're telling me is true, the two of you only saw each other twice throughout the time you were engaged, but you have no idea what both those times may have meant to her. For a few months, she thought you were the one she'd spend her life with, and I suppose you must have thought the same. Don't you owe her closure?"

I stare at my wife, trying to decipher that look in her eyes. "I owe you a whole lot more."

She looks down at her feet before pasting a shaky smile onto her face. "Then do this for me," she pleads. "I don't think it's right to leave things unsaid between you two. I'd much prefer it if this became a clean break."

I smile then, intensely fucking pleased. She's not offering Natalia closure. She's ordering me to end things properly, once and for all. "I like that you sugarcoat your words for me now. Is this an exclusive perk reserved for your husband?"

Her eyes flash with surprise, and then she smiles, her cheeks turning rosy. She didn't think I'd catch on, huh? She underestimates how well I know her. "You truly are exceptionally aggravating," she tells me.

I smirk at her. "So I get under your skin? How about you let me get under your clothes instead? You haven't let me do much more than kiss you lately. I'm dying, you know? If nothing else, I need another taste of your pussy."

Her lips part a little, the way they do when she's about to snap at me, but then she shakes her head and chuckles. Fucking stunning. The way she looks, standing there in that black dress, her long dark hair falling in waves over her body. Fuck. "Maybe," she says, her eyes twinkling. "If you're lucky."

Fuck.

I rise to my feet in a rush, intent on pulling her into my arms, but before I can even reach her, the door opens, and Natalia walks in. Goddamn it.

Natalia glances from me to Valentina, her expression different from usual. The few times I've seen her, she's looked spoiled and entitled — to me, my time, my attention. Today, she looks at me politely, not a hint of malice in her gaze.

Valentina glances back at me as she walks out of my office, and for a moment, I'm convinced I see insecurity in her eyes. Is it crazy that I *want* her to be at least a little bit jealous?

"You were near impossible to contact," Natalia says, a hint of annoyance in her gaze. "So it's safe to assume you didn't want to see me, but I'd like to thank you for meeting with me nonetheless."

I sigh and glance at my glass wall to find Valentina staring at her screen. I thought she'd be curious, but she doesn't seem to be. Why?

"Thank you for coming here, Natalia. I'm sorry for breaking off our engagement so suddenly."

She stares at me and shakes her head, a rueful smile on her lips. "To be honest, Luca. I'm glad you followed your heart. If we'd gotten married, we'd both have been trapped in a loveless marriage. I knew it from the moment I first saw you together, but I was stubborn, and if you hadn't called things off, I'd have paid the price for it."

I glance at Valentina again, fierce protectiveness rendering me immobile for a moment. "Our engagement was broken because I think we're incompatible. In addition, we couldn't come to an agreement about the terms of the merger," I say carefully.

Natalia laughs and glances at Valentina. "Sure, that's the official reason that was given, but we both know better. You have no idea how much trouble you've put me in, do you? My father thinks I've done something wrong, but I'd much rather have it that way. If he knew the truth, it would complicate matters, and my dad's ego wouldn't be able to take it." She hands me a document and smiles. "If he knew you left me for someone else, he'd have felt offended on my behalf, and he wouldn't have allowed me to offer you this."

I stare at the documents in my hands, surprised. "You propose a partnership?"

She nods. "We need a good financial partner, and that hasn't changed. If I'm not mistaken, oil still is something the Windsors want to get into. This

way, we both get the best of both worlds. I will not be involved with this beyond today, so it shouldn't cause any friction." She glances at Valentina through the glass again and smiles. "Honestly, she's terrifying, yet inspiring all at once. You couldn't have found a better match. From the moment I learned of our engagement, I'd been comparing myself to her. Everyone knows she's the one that's always been by your side, and I knew I could never compare. I should've known better than to even try. I made a fool of myself in front of her, purely because she intimidated me." She grins at me then. "Do you think she'll forgive me if I ask?"

I glance back at my wife and nod. "Yes," I murmur, knowing that this one single word is instantly an admission of guilt, too. "I think she will. If not for her, you wouldn't be standing here at all."

She nods, and I rise to my feet to walk her out. Valentina stands up, that irritating smile of hers on her face. I'd give the world to know what she's thinking right now, but her expression doesn't even reveal a hint.

"I'll see you around, darling," Natalia murmurs, a mischievous smile on her lips.

I shake my head, and she chuckles as she walks up to Valentina's desk. I lean back in my doorway as I watch my wife.

"I apologize," Natalia says. "The dinner reservation, the way I spoke to you every single time I've seen you. It was all unwarranted, and not an accurate reflection of who I am." She glances at me then and smirks before looking back at Valentina. "It's odd, because I genuinely admire you, and under different circumstances, I would've hoped we could be friends. Maybe someday, huh? In the meantime, I hope you two are happy together. I mean that."

She smiles at both of us and walks out. I stare at my wife while she watches Natalia walk away, a frown on her face.

"She knows about us. Is that going to be a problem?"

I glance in the direction Natalia walked toward and shake my head. "No, baby," I murmur. "I don't think so."

Perhaps Natalia isn't quite as bad as I thought she was. I could never have made her happy, but I hope she finds someone who does. I was reluctant to meet with her, but ultimately, my wife was right, as she always is. Letting go of any remaining guilt I felt toward her felt good.

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Chapter Thirty-Four

VALENTINA

I stare at my abuela's house, mentally preparing myself to get out of the car. We decided to tell my family tonight, but I'm terrified my mother will see straight through us — or worse, that she'll tell Luca about all the ways I've badmouthed him throughout the years. How do I explain bringing him home now?

"Valentina," Luca says, breaking the silence between us. He's been as quiet as I've been on the way here, both of us lost in thought. "Do you remember what you said at my grandmother's house? You said that you quit because you couldn't bear to see me with Natalia. Is that truly why you tried to leave me?"

I glance at him in surprise. I thought he'd been quiet because he was thinking about all the work that awaits us when we get home tonight, but it

looks like I was mistaken. I run a hand through my hair and look out the window. No, If I'm truly honest with myself, I knew that's not why he's been behaving so oddly in the last couple of days, but I'd been in denial. He's been different since he spoke to Natalia, but somehow, I was too scared to ask him what was on his mind. Part of me fears what his answer would be. I'm trying my hardest to escape the past, but my wounds often still feel fresh. I'm scared he'll betray me, or that he'll realize I'm worthless, and he'll abandon me. I'm scared to ask too many questions, in case I find out something I didn't want to know. He turned me into a coward, and I hate it. I never wanted to care about him as much as I do.

"Yes," I admit, heat rushing to my cheeks. We promised we'd communicate, but right now, I wish I'd never agreed to. "It's true."

"Then what about the other excuses you gave me?"

"Those are also true," I tell him. "I do want to have a life of my own. For as long as I can remember, I've gone through the motions without truly living, and I'm worried I'll one day look back at my life and find it empty. But… I've felt that way for years, and it was never enough to make me quit."

Luca smiles then, his eyes twinkling. "Did you ever stop to think about why you acted on impulse when that is entirely out of character for you?"

It was all unwarranted, and not an accurate reflection of who I am. That's what Natalia told me. Is that what made him rethink my behavior throughout that time? Has he been thinking about her all along? I know that it's irrational, but I don't want her to be on his mind at all, not even if it's merely because something she said made him think of *me*.

My heart starts to race, and I clear my throat as I glance back at my grandmother's house. "Um, I think it's best if we tell my family that we're dating. If we tell them we got married so abruptly, they'd never believe it," I tell him, changing the subject.

Luca chuckles and nods. He's leaning back, one arm on the steering wheel. "It's your family, Valentina. I'll do whatever you want me to."

I stare at him for a moment, surprised. "I never knew you could be this easygoing. For years, you gave me hell, when all along you could've been this kind. I feel really wronged, you know?"

He grins at me and reaches for me, his touch gentle as he pushes a strand of hair behind my ear. "Then let me make it up to you, Valentina. *This*… this is all reserved for my wife. *For you*. So take advantage of it all

you want. For as long as you want me, I'm yours. I'll treat you like you're the single most precious person to me, with one exception."

I blink in confusion. "What's the exception?"

He smirks. "I can't be kind to you when I fuck you, baby." His eyes darken, and I look away, my heart racing.

"Who says I'll ever sleep with you?" I ask, my voice trembling. We've become more comfortable with each other's bodies, but each time things get a little too heated at home, I've pulled away using work as an excuse. It's just sex, but somehow, I don't think I'm ready. I'm already in far deeper than I ever wanted to be. I'm afraid that if I give him my body, he'll consume me.

Luca chuckles and glances out the window. "It's cute that you think you'll be able to resist me for much longer. Before the night is over, I'll have you begging for my cock, wife." He looks back at me, his gaze smoldering. "When I close my eyes, I can hear you moaning my name, Valentina. Making you come is a fucking delight, but it isn't nearly enough. I need to feel your pussy wrapped around my cock."

My cheeks flush, and he grins. "I won't *ever* beg you for anything," I tell him, indignant.

Luca chuckles and reaches for me, his index finger brushing between my brows and down the bridge of my nose, his movements leisurely. "You will," he says, pausing on my lips. "First, you're going to beg me to make you come again, and then you're going to beg me to fuck you."

I open my mouth to protest, but he presses his finger against my lips and shakes his head. "For now, we should go in. It looks like we caught someone's attention."

Luca pulls his hand away, and I glance through the windshield to find my mother standing by the front door. Her silhouette is illuminated by the porch lights, and she's clearly trying to look into the dark car as she leans against her walking stick. I pray she isn't able to see us. Who knows what kind of image Luca and I just presented?

Luca steps out of the car and walks around it to open my door for me, startling me. I don't think I can get used to this version of him. I thought I knew him better than anyone, but I'm slowly learning there's a side of him I never knew existed. He offers me his hand, and I take it hesitantly. I'm nervous we'll mess up somehow, and my mom will see through us. The last time I mentioned Luca was when I told them that I'd quit, after all.

Luca entwines our fingers as he leads me to the front door, and my mother frowns at us. Her gaze drops to our joined hands, and she purses her lips. “Mom,” I say, my voice trembling. “It was somewhat chaotic the last time he came over, with all the medics and the police at our house, so I didn’t have a chance to introduce you.” She stares me down, and the look in her eyes increases my nerves. “This is Luca Windsor, my boyfriend.”

Mom’s eyes widen when she realizes who he is. For years, I’ve mentioned Luca, but she’s never met him before. “Luca?” she repeats. “Your *boss*?” She looks at him then, and for a moment, it’s almost like recognition flashes through her eyes, but then she grits her teeth, anger drowning it out. I wonder if she’s seen him on the news before, or in any of those gossip magazines she loves. I hope it wasn’t the latter, because the press has been doing all they can to uncover news about Natalia and him, much to my dismay.

Luca lets go of my hand to offer it to her. “It’s good to finally meet you,” he says, a sweet smile on his face. “Valentina has told me so much about you. Please accept my apologies for not properly introducing myself last time. It was a tough situation for all of us, and my priority was ensuring Valentina was okay, and that the team I hired to find and take care of your mother had everything they need.”

Some of the frost in her eyes melts away, but she continues to stare at him, her gaze unnerving. She carries that same expression whenever she talks about my dad.

“Please, come in,” she says reluctantly. Perhaps I should’ve warned her before coming over with him. I thought it would be better to get it over with, but I should’ve thought this through more.

“The medics,” Mom says, “you sent them?”

Luca nods and places his hand on my lower back, as though it’s only natural for him to do so. For years, we physically kept an appropriate distance between us, yet he’s falling into his new role with such ease. Has he always been that good at acting? Somehow, I find it concerning, because I can’t tell if any of it is real.

“Valentina has been incredibly worried about her grandmother, so I thought it would be best to ease her mind in this way. I hope I haven’t overstepped.”

Mom shakes her head and leans onto her walking stick heavily, the way she does when she’s thinking. “Not at all,” she tells him. “We’re very

grateful. It’s just that I thought it was Valentina who sent them.” She looks at me then, her gaze filled with accusation. “You never told me anything. Why am I only just finding out that we’ve been shamelessly accepting your boss’s help?”

Mom’s eyes flash with pure dismay, and I lower my gaze. We’ve only just walked in, and this is already going wrong. She looks like she has more to say to me, but instead she leads us into the living room, where Abuela is watching TV.

“Val?” Abuela says.

I walk up to her and hug her tightly, grateful to find her lucid. It breaks my heart when she doesn’t recognize me, and knowing that it’s going to start occurring more often kills me.

“Who is this handsome young man?” Abuela asks, grinning. She blatantly checks Luca out, and I glance back at him to find him looking somewhat flustered, his cheeks a little rosier than usual. My heart starts to race, and I bite back a smile.

He offers her his hand and smiles. “I’m Luca Windsor. It’s so good to meet you, ma’am.”

Abuela chuckles and looks back at me. “Lucifer? Your boss?”

My eyes widen, and I clear my throat awkwardly. “*Luca*,” I correct her. “It’s Luca.” For a woman who has been struggling with her memory lately, she’s very on point with her remarks today. How could she possibly remember that I have him saved as Lucifer in my phone? I’d better change that before Luca finds out.

Abuela looks between the two of us, and Luca wraps an arm around my shoulder, a questioning look in his eyes as he turns toward me. There’s no way he missed her Lucifer comment, and I’d better come up with a valid explanation. I clear my throat awkwardly and force a smile. “Abuelita, Luca… he is my boyfriend.”

She bursts out laughing and shakes her head. “I knew it,” she tells me. “Every time you called him the devil himself and cursed him, there was something more behind it. I’m surprised it took so long.”

Luca leans into me, his nose brushing past my ear. “The devil himself?” he whispers, and my cheeks flush instantly as remorse washes over me.

My mother places a tray with four cups of Café de Olla on the table and sits down next to Abuela, her expression aloof. She crosses her arms and motions to the sofa adjacent to her. “Sit.”

Luca follows my lead, his expression serene despite my mother's obvious and sudden rudeness.

"How long have you two been dating?"

Luca grabs my hand and entwines our fingers, his downcast gaze a sign that he'll let me take the lead.

"We only started dating very recently, but like Abuela said, it was inevitable. We realized we wanted to be together shortly after I quit my job."

Mom starts to tap her foot, her face betraying her anger. "*You*. You're engaged, aren't you? What exactly is it that you're trying to do? Are you trying to turn my daughter into your mistress?"

I should've realized this is what her concern would be. Perhaps it would've been better to admit we got married. That would put these worries at ease, but it's too late to communicate that to Luca now, especially since I've already introduced him as my boyfriend.

Luca tenses and tightens his grip on my hand. "It wasn't my choice or desire to get engaged, and that engagement has since been broken. Please rest assured. I will not be marrying that woman."

Mom huffs and rolls her eyes. "How long are you going to string my daughter along with that story? It's always the same tale, isn't it? You'll promise to leave your fiancée or wife, but you won't. And if you do leave your fiancée, you'll end up going back to her."

I know Luca well enough to know when he's getting angry, despite his carefully blank face. He glances at me for a moment, and I shoot him a reassuring smile.

"Mom, I've known Luca for eight years, and I promise you that he isn't like that. His engagement really was broken. It just hasn't been reported yet by the media."

"I'm against this," she tells me. "What are you thinking, Val? End this relationship *immediately*. This will impact your work and everything you've built. People will start to question whether you slept your way up, and in the end, he'll want someone who has more to offer. He's blinded by passion, but it'll wear off, and he'll abandon you. End it *now*, before you lose everything you worked for. You never should have gone to work for that family at all. I knew something like this would happen. Do you really believe you can overcome the differences between you? *You can't.* You should have known better, Valentina."

I start to tremble, unsure how to refute her words. I knew this conversation wouldn't be easy, but I didn't expect her to act this way in front of Luca.

He wraps his arm around me and looks at my mother. "Ma'am," he says, his tone polite. "First of all, I'd like to apologize for lying to you. The truth is that I *married* your daughter. She told you we were dating because she thought it would be difficult for you to accept us eloping, but it is what it is. Valentina is my *wife*. I agree that us being together would impact her work, and yes, the engagement that was forced upon me further complicates matters, but ultimately it comes down to one thing. I love your daughter, and I want to spend the rest of my life with her, no matter the trials we might face."

Abuela gasps, and then she chuckles. "Good for you, mi niña," she says, her eyes sparkling. "It has been eight years. There is no need to wait longer. It's good that you got married."

Luca grins at her in gratitude, but my mother stares at us in shock and dismay.

"How could you do this?" she asks me, her voice soft. I stare down at my lap, unsure what to say. "You will regret this, Valentina."

Mom rises to her feet and grabs her walking stick, her face in obvious pain as she walks out of the room. I stare after her, my heart aching. How is it that once again, she left me feeling the same way she always does? Lonely and bitter.

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Chapter Thirty-Five

LUCA

Valentina is quiet as we walk into our house, clearly distraught by her mother's behavior. The entire experience was unexpected, even for me. I didn't think she'd be as antagonistic as she was, and I can't help but wonder if she speaks to Valentina that way often.

"I'm sorry about my mother," my wife says as she slips out of her heels, placing her shoes next to mine. "I'm not sure what I was expecting, but this is probably as well as it could've gone."

She walks to the living room barefoot, and I follow her, oddly affected by her mellow mood. This was never meant to be more than a marriage of convenience, yet I hate the way she tries to hide her pain from me. I've never wanted to be someone women turn to for consolation, but that's exactly what I want my wife to do.

“Your grandmother is incredibly sweet and really quite adorable.”

She puts her legs on the sofa and draws her knees to her chest, her arms wrapping around them. “She seems to be doing okay. I know it isn’t possible to cure her, but it’s such a relief to know that she has the care she needs. Just knowing that there’s no chance of her going missing again puts me at ease. I honestly can’t thank you enough, Luca. I never would’ve been able to afford top of the line care for her. The thought of her being mistreated, or her just being another patient that her overworked nurses don’t truly care about… I can’t take it.”

I turn to face her and lean back against the sofa. “You know what, Valentina? I thought it was especially adorable when she called me *Lucifer*,” I murmur, knowing it’ll shift her thoughts into a different direction.

Valentina’s eyes widen, and the guilty look she throws me makes it hard to keep from smiling, but I manage it somehow.

“I think she also said something about me being *the devil incarnate*? Or did you call me *the devil himself*? What was it? Remind me.”

She clears her throat awkwardly, and I bite back a smile as I pull her toward me. She falls into me, and I lift her into my arms and reposition her until I’ve got her straddling me, the two of us facing each other. “Care to explain, wife?”

She looks away, looking flustered in an entirely different way than she did when we walked into the house. I thread a hand through her hair and force her to face me, my eyes dropping to her lips.

“Um,” she says. “Well, it’s a long story, really.”

I raise my brow, bemused. “Good thing we’ve got all night.”

The edges of my lips tip up into a smile as I watch her think real hard about what she’s going to tell me. In the end, she decides to wrap her arms around my neck, a coy look in her eyes. “*Luca*,” she says, her tone cutesy. Fuck. “Don’t be like that, hmm?”

So my wife knows how to act flirtatious, huh? This is yet another side of her I never knew existed, and it’s one I surprisingly love. I’ve always hated it when women act coy around me, but when it’s Valentina, it’s a huge fucking turn-on. Watching her placate me like that? Fuck yeah.

Her cheeks turn rosy when she feels me harden underneath her, and she shifts in my lap, repositioning me so my cock pushes against her pussy. Does she even realize she did that, or did she do it without thinking?

My hands move down from her waist to her ass, and I knead her curves, enjoying the feel of her. “What other creative nicknames do you have for me, huh?”

She bites down on her lip and looks at me wide-eyed. “I think it’s best if you never *ever* find out. Don’t you know that sometimes it’s best not to ask questions?”

I grin at her and shake my head. “That bad, huh? Fine. Tell me instead how you’re going to compensate me for all the time I just spent at your grandmother’s house. You know my time is precious, right? Pay up.”

She bites down on her lip and frowns thoughtfully. “Well, I’ve got this really flashy black card from The Windsor Bank. Would that help?”

I narrow my eyes at her, trying my best to hide my amusement. I was worried she’d be upset all night, but I’m glad I managed to turn her mood around. “My time is worth more than just money, Valentina. How long did we spend at your grandma’s? An hour?”

She nods, a smile on her face. This sight of her is additive, and I can already feel myself craving more. It’s funny how she thinks I’ll let her go in three years.

“Then give me back one hour,” I murmur, leaning in. My lips brush against hers, and I smile. “One hour of my name on your lips and your body at my mercy.”

I move one hand up and cup the back of her neck, my lips finding hers. This kiss isn’t as urgent as usual, but somehow, it turns me on even more. The way her breath hitches, the way she gently rotates her hips in my lap as she opens up her hot little mouth for me. Valentina is an addiction in the making, and I haven’t even fucked her yet.

She moans when her hands brush over the lapels of my suit jacket and I smile as I pull my lips off hers for a moment. “Take it off,” I murmur.

She does as I ask and lets my jacket fall to the floor before immediately unbuttoning my shirt, her gaze as heated as I’m sure mine is. I love that she doesn’t play games with me. Her desire is written all over her face, and she’s owning up to it. Finally. She’s been holding back lately, and I thought I’d go crazy.

Valentina inhales sharply when my shirt falls open, and I smirk at her as I lean in for another kiss, my touch rougher now. I force her lips open, stealing away every single moan, every pant. My hands wrap around the

hem of the blouse she's wearing, and I pull it off impatiently, taking my lips off hers just long enough for her to lift her arms.

"Fuck," I groan when I see the bra she's wearing. Black lace and sexy straps that make it impossible to look away. "You'll be the death of me," I whisper as I reach around her to undo it.

My cock starts to throb when it falls away, exposing her perfect tear drop tits, her nipples already hard for me. I wrap my hands around her waist and pull her up onto her knees, so I've got her tits right in my face, where they belong.

My lips wrap around her nipple, and she moans my name, driving me insane. I could come just like that, from the mere sound of her. Her hands wrap into my hair, and I look up, my eyes on hers as I flick my tongue, teasing her.

"Luca," she whispers, her gaze dark with desire.

I smirk as I continue to torment my wife, my hands slowly moving down from her waist, until they disappear under her skirt. Her breathing is irregular as I push her wet panties aside, my thumb brushing over her pussy.

Her eyes fall closed for a moment as her hips buck. "Oh god," she whispers. It's unreal, having her in front of me like this, her upper body bare and her skirt wrapped around her waist. I thought the fantasies I've had of her were hot, but nothing could prepare me for reality. I'll never get used to this.

Valentina reaches for my pants and undoes them impatiently, her fingers somewhat clumsy. I chuckle as I lift my hips and push my suit pants and boxers out of the way, lost in the moment with her. I don't remember the last time I felt this frantic.

My wife sits back down in my lap, my cock perfectly positioned against her pussy as she wraps her arms around my neck, her breasts pressed against my chest. She's so close, yet still not close enough.

"Valentina," I murmur, my lips coming down on hers. "These have to go," I groan, my fingers wrapping around the thin lace fabric of her panties. I want to feel her pussy fully — I don't want any of this fabric against my cock. I tear it off and she gasps, but I take her lips before complaints can escape it.

"Yeah," I moan into her mouth as she begins to move on top of me. "Just like that, baby." She grinds on top of me as we lose ourselves in this kiss, her hands in my hair and mine on her ass, kneading, playing.

With each move, the tip of my cock pushes into her, and I kiss her harder, my sanity slowly devolving into nothingness. The way she moans into my mouth undoes me, and I'm not sure how much more I can take.

"Enough," I groan when she once again takes the tip of my cock before letting it slip out again, teasing me. I turn her over on the sofa roughly, until I've got her on her back, her hair spread out fucking beautifully.

She looks at me through her lashes, with her lips slightly parted. Yeah, this woman knows exactly what she's doing to me.

I smile as I take off her skirt, exposing her naked body at last. "You have no idea how many times I've fantasized about this," I murmur, my eyes roaming over her. "Yet somehow, my fantasies didn't do you justice."

She blushes, and my heart skips a beat. Valentina Windsor. Yeah, I'm fucking obsessed with her. I'm impatient as I take off the shirt she unbuttoned and kick off my suit pants fully, not wanting anything between us.

Valentina's eyes widen when I spread her legs and move between them, her eyes settling on my cock as I rise to my knees. She bites down on her lip, her chest rising and falling rapidly. She's the sexiest fucking thing I've ever seen, and I can't believe she's my *wife*.

I lean over her and grab her wrists, pinning them above her head with one hand while the other one moves to my cock.

"Luca," she says, her tone worried. "Be… be gentle, okay?"

My heart starts to race, and I nod as I line my cock up. "I won't hurt you," I murmur as I push the tip into her. "You're so fucking wet, baby, your fucking thighs are soaked. It'll be okay, I promise."

She shakes her head when I push in a bit further, a soft gasp escaping her lips. There's a hint of torment in her gaze, as though I'm stretching her out too far already, but she doesn't dare to admit it. It's no surprise that Valentina won't admit defeat, even now.

I pause and move both hands around her wrists, pinning her down with my weight, my eyes on hers. "You're doing so good," I whisper, my tone gentle as I push in just a little deeper.

She moans my name, but she doesn't take her eyes off me. "You're such a good girl, aren't you?" I murmur. "Keep looking at me that way, Valentina. It's just you and me, baby."

I watch her as she arches her back, her chest grazing against mine. I press my lips against her neck and kiss her gently, pushing yet another inch

into her tight pussy.

“Look at you taking my cock, Valentina.” I kiss her neck and slowly move my way up to her ear, to that spot that makes her moan for me.

“It’s too much,” she whispers, her voice trembling.

I pull nearly all the way out of her before slowly pushing back in. “Yeah?” I ask, my movements gentle. My eyes find hers, and my heart skips a beat. There’s something about the way she looks at me that makes my heart skip a beat. Usually, she hides part of herself from the world, and I don’t even think she realizes it. Here, right now, with my cock pushing into her like that… she’s all mine. I want her thoughts ruled by me, her eyes on no one but me.

“How is this?” I murmur as I keep moving three inches in and out of her, slowly, until her breathing turns into pants and desire dominates her gaze. She has no idea how hard it is for me to stop myself from slamming my cock all the way into her, yet somehow, when it’s her, I’ve got endless patience.

“Yeah,” she moans, her hips moving with me.

“Good girl,” I whisper as I push in a little deeper, earning myself another gasp from her. I’m not even halfway in, and she’s already barely able to take it.

“Luca,” she moans, and I thrust into her a little further, my lips finding hers. I kiss her slowly as I continue to fuck her this way, driving myself completely fucking insane with desire. I need to be fully inside her, but I’m too scared to hurt her. I can’t remember the last time I cared more about a woman’s pleasure than my own.

I pull out of her and earn myself a surprised and disgruntled moan as I sit down on my knees between her legs. I wrap my hands around her thighs, and she gasps, her cheeks turning a deep crimson. “Luca,” she whispers, her hands moving over her breasts, covering herself up.

“No,” I chastise her. “Put your hands above your head. Don’t hide from me, Valentina. Did you forget what you promised me?” I pull her closer and keep her hips raised at an angle as I push back into her, my thumb resting against her clit. She obeys and puts her hands above her head with perfectly rosy cheeks, her body on display for me. “This pussy is mine,” I remind her. “Every fucking inch of you is *mine*. So look at me, my love. Look at what you do to me.”

I keep my fingers on her clit as I slide in and out of her, my movements shallow for fear I'll hurt her. The way her pussy wraps around me is enough to make me come just like this. I don't remember the last time a woman drove me this crazy.

I watch her as I play with her pussy, her moans becoming more and more frantic as I perfectly coordinate every thrust with a flick of my thumb, teasing her clit until I've got her right at the edge.

"You want to come for me, wife?"

"*Yes*," she moans. "Yes, Luca. *Please*."

I smile and circle her clit, keeping my cock at the right angle to push against her G-spot. I love the way she moans my name, the way her desire is all for me, as it always should have been.

"How badly do you want it, baby?"

She rotates her hips in an attempt to get my fingers to move the way she wants them to, riding both my cock and my hand simultaneously. Watching Valentina unravel is the rarest and most beautiful sight I've ever laid eyes on. My perfectly in control secretary is desperate for my cock, desperate for an orgasm only I can give her.

"*Luca*," she moans.

"Tell me who this pussy belongs to," I murmur, enjoying toying with her. For years, she's driven me crazy, tormenting my dreams and fantasies.

"It's yours," she tells me, her tone pleading. Hearing her admit that she's mine is a real fucking rush. It'll never get old. Finally. Fucking *finally*, she's mine. "My pussy is yours, Luca. All of me is yours, husband. *Please*, give me more. Make me come, Luca."

Fuck. Valentina fucking Windsor. Every time I think I have the upper hand, she turns things around. Hearing her call me her husband has me ready to come deep inside her tight, hot pussy.

I smile as I increase the pace at which my fingers move, teasing her clit harder and sending her over the edge. "*Oh, yes, Luca,*" she groans, and I push all the way into her, my eyes falling closed for a moment as her pussy contracts around me, nearly fucking milking me for all I'm worth. I've barely even begun to fuck her and I'm already struggling.

I lean over her and reposition us so I'm on top of her, needing her closer with a new kind of desperation. "When you moan my name like that, you make it really fucking hard not to come, you goddamn fucking tease."

She smiles at me seductively, her eyes still glazed over from her orgasm. Valentina moves her hands into my hair, her touch fucking intoxicating. It’s just me and her in this moment, and nothing has ever felt quite this real.

I pull back and thrust back into her harshly, earning myself another one of her moans. Her eyes widen when I push into her all the way and her lips fall open.

“I knew you could take all of it, baby,” I murmur, before doing it all over again, my movements rough as I finally fuck her the way I’ve been wanting to, nearly losing all control.

She wraps her legs around me, moving with me, her nails scraping over my back as I take her pussy. “I can’t take it,” I groan, already at the edge. “It’s far too fucking good.”

I can’t believe I spent years keeping her at a distance when we could’ve been like this all along. Valentina brings my head closer and kisses me, and that’s all it takes for me to lose it. I fuck her savagely as I spill deep inside her, painting her pretty pussy white.

I just came, and I already need more of her. Three years won’t be nearly enough.

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Chapter Thirty-Six

VALENTINA

Luca carries me to his bedroom, leaving our clothes strewn all over the living room. He's holding me so tenderly that I can't help but feel vulnerable. I always knew being with him would be amazing, but that felt like more than just sex. It felt like he truly wanted *me*. All of me. It felt like an apology for the past and a promise of all that is to come, all at once.

He smiles as he lays me down on his bed before joining me underneath the blankets. Luca pulls me into him wordlessly and caresses my back with one arm while the other pulls my leg up and over his hip. I thought he'd want distance after the way he just took my body, and the intimacy between us surprises me. It makes my heart race and adds to the vulnerability he makes me feel.

I place my hand on his chest and snuggle into him, breathing him in. When was the last time I felt so perfectly satisfied? I don't think I ever have.

"How do you feel?" he asks, his voice low.

I glance up at him, admiring his strong jaw and that twinkling look in his eyes. "Sore," I admit. "But in a good way."

He chuckles and presses a kiss to my forehead, surprising me. I never knew Luca could be so sweet. Is he like this with every woman he takes to bed, or did this feel as special to him as it did for me? I shouldn't want to be his exception, but I do.

"Your pussy is a fucking delight," he murmurs. "I'm not sure how I'm ever supposed to get any work done again. How will I ever be able to look at you again, without thinking about the way you feel wrapped around my cock?"

I bury my face in his neck, embarrassed, but that just earns me another chuckle from him. Luca tightens his grip on me and hugs me tightly, eliciting feelings in me I should never experience around him. This is, after all, temporary. If this is what he does to me after one single time, what kind of state will I be in, in three years? I don't want to get hurt again.

I push away from him a little, but his hold on me doesn't loosen in the least. "Stay," he growls. "Stay right here in my arms, where you belong."

Part of me wants to rebel against him and keep him at a distance, just like I do with everyone else, but he's always been different. Luca has always been the only one I couldn't say no to.

My nose brushes over his neck, and I press a soft kiss to his throat, my actions impulsive. It doesn't feel like he's mine, yet the man holding me in his arms is undoubtedly my *husband*. Would it be okay if I stole some moments with him that shouldn't belong to me? Will I come to regret it when I do? I'm oddly scared, because the kind of happiness I'm feeling right now is always followed by despair that outweighs it. I'm terrified that my mother is right.

Luca buries a hand into my hair and grips tightly, his breathing uneven. Being in his embrace is something I never thought I'd experience, and it scares me how good it feels. If this is how things are between us in private, it won't be so hard to convince everyone we're in love, because he's fooling even me. Perhaps we should've done this before we went to my

grandmother's house. Maybe then, my mother wouldn't have responded the way she did.

"Luca," I murmur, my lips moving against his skin. "I'm sorry for how rude my mom was to you today. I have no excuse, and I'm honestly a little embarrassed about it."

He strokes my hair leisurely, the movement soothing. I let my eyes flutter closed as I revel in his touch, allowing myself a moment of the peace he brings me.

"Don't apologize to me, Valentina. You're my wife, and we're in this together, aren't we?"

His words startle me. I'm so used to being on my own and not having anyone to rely on that truly having him on my side feels foreign. Even as we worked together throughout the years, the atmosphere between us was antagonistic, filled with a hint of mistrust and disdain on both our parts. I was always scared I'd do something that would truly cost me my job, and Luca always felt like he couldn't blindly trust me because it was his grandmother that employed me. This, right here, is new territory to us.

"You said you value communication, and while it isn't my forte either, I do agree with you. I want to try harder at it too," I murmur. "If we're going to get through the next three years together, then I think it's important that you understand why my mother is this way. I don't want you to dislike her or blame her for her frequent harshness. She means well, but she's just been hurt and disappointed over and over again throughout her life."

Luca nods, his stubble brushing against my temple. He continues to stroke my hair as I muster up the courage to tell him about my childhood. I'm scared this might change his image of me, but I can't hide it from him either.

He kisses my forehead and shakes his head. "You don't have to tell me if you don't want to. The last thing I want to do is pressure you into telling me something before you're ready. Right here, right now, you aren't my secretary, Valentina. You're my *wife*. You owe me your future, but not your past."

I reach for him and trace over the contours of his face with my fingertips. "I think you deserve to know. Maybe… maybe it would help you understand."

He nods and gently brushes my hair aside, his full attention on me. "My father… he was born with a silver spoon in his mouth, and my mother…

well, to be honest, she washed and polished that spoon for him. Mom was one of the many housekeepers his family employed. They never should have been together. They're from two entirely different worlds, but they fell in love regardless."

I inhale shakily, my nerves nearly getting the best of me. "When my father's family found out, they threatened to disown him, but by then, my mother was already pregnant with me. They said she did it on purpose, and they called her a gold digger. They tried paying her off in hopes she'd abort me, but my dad found out. He took her away, and the two of them found a small place together. I think he was trying to do the right thing, but I don't think he realized what that would entail. All of a sudden, he lost all of his luxuries, and since his family cut him off, most of his network started to snub him too. I guess he thought he'd be fine, and that they'd forgive him once I was born, but they never did. They wanted nothing to do with me."

Luca plays with my hair as he listens intently. "Then what happened?" he asks, his voice soft.

"My parents struggled for years, and I still remember their frequent arguments. I didn't truly understand it until years later, but it turns out that he'd started seeing the woman his family initially wanted him to marry. I remember the way he'd act weird about his phone, and the way my mother would always question him. I was so young, yet somehow, I can still remember fragments of their conversations. The shouting, the accusations, and above all else, the way it made me feel. It was hell."

I let my eyes fall closed for a moment and take a steadying breath. "He was cheating on my mom for about a year, and eventually, he left us when I was seven. I still remember that day vividly, because he was supposed to pick me up from school and he never showed. The school had to call my mother, and when we got home together, he was gone, not a trace left of him. He'd packed all his things and disappeared."

I inhale shakily, and Luca cups my cheek, his thumb catching the tears I hadn't realized were falling. "When I got older, I managed to track him down. I just wanted an explanation, you know? I went to his office, but they denied me access. So I left the building and hid outside, certain there was a misunderstanding. I waited for him for hours, until eventually, a car stopped right in front of the building, moments before he walked out. A little boy jumped out of the car and into his arms, and he hugged him so tightly as he swung his son around. Then a woman joined him, and he pressed the

sweetest kiss to her forehead. They made for such a beautiful picture, and I finally realized why he refused to see me."

I squeeze my eyes closed and inhale shakily. "Years later, I found out that he ended up marrying the woman his family chose for him in return for his parents accepting him back into the family. For at least a year, my mother accused him of cheating, and in the end, she turned out to be right. He ended up falling for the woman his family wanted him to marry, and he left us for her. While he started a new life, all I really had was my grandmother. My mom was never the same after he left, and I think it was hard for her to face me."

I pull away a little to look at him, my touch hesitant as my fingertips brush over the ends of his hair. "That's why she's so jaded, and why she's so concerned about me. She thinks you're using me, or that I'm just a passing interest to you. My mother is convinced that eventually, you'll leave me for someone who's a better fit, the way my father did. She doesn't trust rich people at all, and she's never liked that I work for you." I look away and try my best to ignore the dull ache in my heart. "She's right, of course. In three years, we'll part ways, and we'll both lead our own lives. Eventually, you'll find someone you'll actually want to spend your life with, and I'll be no more than a distant memory. The woman you'll grow old with will likely be someone who can be an asset to you and who brings as much to the table as you do. I'm prepared for that, but my mother isn't. She thinks it's something she needs to protect me from, and it won't be easy to convince her otherwise. I know I'll break her heart in three years, but in the meantime, will you please help me ease her worries?"

He nods and cups my cheek, his touch gentle. Luca's thumb brushes over my lip, and he sighs. "So your mother… she's been like this all your life? This is the only version of her you've known since you were a child?"

I nod and look away. "I have some good memories from before my father left, but none from after that. She wasn't around much while I was growing up. I was mostly raised by my grandmother, because Mom worked such long hours. Whenever she was home, though, she was just the way she was today. Hurt and lashing out at the world. Now that I'm older, I can see it for what it is. She's a broken woman, and the shards of her cut everyone who comes too close. I don't want her words to hurt you too, Luca."

He nods, his gaze unreadable. "Don't worry, wife," he murmurs. "She won't hurt me." He pauses for a moment, his gaze roaming over my face.

“When you asked me for fidelity, it seemed like you had some scars of your own. Was that strictly related to your parents?”

My eyes widen, and I look away, unable to face him. “No,” I whisper, unwilling to talk about it but unable to lie to him.

For a moment, I think he’ll demand more answers, but instead he just nods and leans in, his lips brushing over my forehead. “I hear you,” he murmurs. “I’ll be patient with your mother, and I’ll try my best to reassure her, okay?”

I smile at him in gratitude, and he gently combs a hand through my hair. The look in his eyes can’t quite be described as sympathy, and it isn’t pity either… but it’s *something*.

It’s something that makes me feel relieved I shared my story with him, when it’s a truth I’ve always hidden. Something about Luca puts me at ease, and the fact that he has that power over me is worrying.

“Valentina,” he says, his voice soft. “I apologize for what I said to you on Ares’s wedding day. Those words would have been hurtful regardless, but to hear me say that to you when it’s the exact type of thing your mother would have had to deal with, the kind of thing she would’ve warned you against… I’m really sorry. I fully understand why you were so hurt, and if I could take it back, I would.”

I shake my head, my heart heavy. “It’s okay. You couldn’t have known.”

“That doesn’t make it right, nor does it make it forgivable.”

I brush the back of my fingers over his cheek and smile. “Yet I forgive you nonetheless.”

“Tell me, baby. Do you worry that I’d do something like that to you? Do you think I’d leave you for someone like Natalia?”

My heart twists painfully, and I look away. “I would, if this marriage was real, but it isn’t.”

In three years, he and I will part ways, no strings attached. It should relieve me of all worries, but with each passing day, it becomes harder to envision a life without Luca.

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Chapter Thirty-Seven

VALENTINA

I check the time and sigh as I walk into the house at eleven in the evening. For days now, I've been avoiding Luca, working late and making sure I'm out the door before he is in the mornings. I've felt oddly flustered and uncomfortable ever since we slept together, but it wasn't the sex that threw me off. It was the intimacy that followed.

Luca has been treating me the same at work, but the way he looks at me has changed. I'm scared that he thinks less of me now, or that he'll take pity on me. I worked incredibly hard to cultivate my professional image, and I feel like I ruined it all in just one single night. Besides, I'm worried about the thinning boundaries between us.

It's been a long time since I shared so much of myself with another, and I'm worried I revealed too much. The last time I opened up to someone that

way, I ended up heartbroken.

Luca has been confusing me lately and I'm uncertain how to handle this new version of him. I thought I knew exactly who he was and what I could expect in this marriage of convenience, but nothing about it feels convenient anymore. When he asked me to marry him, he made it seem so simple. I figured I'd pretend to be his wife in front of his family, and in private, nothing would change. I couldn't have been more wrong. With each passing day, I grow more scared to lose my heart all over again, permanently this time.

I pause on my way to the kitchen and instinctively hide at the sound of Luca's voice. "Yeah?" he says, his voice soft. I thought he'd be in bed by now, but it looks like I was wrong.

I peek around the corner to find him standing in front of the stove, his earbuds in. He's dressed in gray sweatpants that give him an entirely unfair advantage, and the black t-shirt he's wearing strains around his muscles in a way that makes it impossible to look away.

"Don't be upset," he murmurs, his tone gentle.

I tense, a knot settling in my stomach. Who is he speaking to? I've never heard him take that tone with anyone but me, and he only started speaking to me so sweetly once we got married. Who is it that's got him exposing a side of himself that he hid from me for years?

"I know. I'll handle it, okay? I promise."

My heart clenches tightly and I inhale shakily. Is it Natalia? I still remember the way he looked at her when she came into the office. When they first got engaged, he seemed patient but reluctant around her, but the last time they spoke, he acted different. He was kinder, more gentle. Something about that time didn't sit well with me and left me feeling irrationally jealous. I hide behind the door and continue to listen in, unable to suppress my curiosity. The news of their engagement being called off was shared this morning, so perhaps he's reassuring her that it won't negatively affect her?

I watch as he takes out his earbuds, my heart uneasy. "How long are you going to stand there, Valentina?" I tense, and he chuckles as he turns around to face me. "Are you done running away from me yet?"

I clear my throat and tear my gaze away. Luca looks amazing in a three-piece suit, but I think I like him best this way. "I wasn't running."

He turns the stove off and leans back against the counter, his hand disappearing into his pocket as he retrieves the golden pocket watch he carries everywhere. “It’s way past eleven, and you’re only just coming home. You’ve somehow managed to be in meetings every single day for a week straight, and you’ve been coming home late. Why are you hiding behind your work?”

I walk up to him and reach for a glass in the cupboard beside him, trying my best to act nonchalantly. “I’ve just been busy,” I tell him, but it sounds unconvincing even to me.

Luca turns toward me and wraps an arm around my waist as he moves behind me. He pushes me against the counter and presses his body against mine, trapping me in his embrace from behind.

I inhale sharply when he brushes my hair aside and leans in, his lips settling against the back of my neck. “Yeah?” he whispers. “Or are you running from this?” He kisses my neck, his touch soft as he moves his way up to my ear. “Are you just busy, or are you scared of giving into this thing between us?”

His hand moves up to my breast and a soft moan escapes my lips when he kisses me below my ear. I can feel him harden against my ass, and he thrusts his hips into me, showing me how much he wants me. “Answer me,” he demands, one hand moving into my hair even as he tightens his grip on me, pulling me against him harder. Luca grabs my hair and pulls on it, exposing more of my neck. His lips trail down to my throat, and I inhale shakily.

“Just busy,” I lie, my voice husky.

He chuckles and lets go of me, eliciting a frustrated groan from me. “Oh,” he says, taking a step away. He leans against one of the counters and runs a hand through his hair, his cock clearly on display for me through his gray sweatpants. “My bad,” he adds. “I guess I got it wrong, huh?”

I blink in disbelief, disappointed he’d stop there. He looks into my eyes, his gaze provocative, almost as though he’s daring me to walk up to him and ask for more. I bite down on my lip and tear my gaze away, my eyes settling on his phone. I stare at it for a moment, unable to push aside the unease I’m feeling. He was definitely speaking to a woman earlier. I have access to his work phone, but not his personal phone, so there’s no way for me to figure out who it was.

He promised me fidelity, but I can't enforce that. It wouldn't be too late for him to regret marrying me and rectify his mistake. When it comes down to it, Natalia is better suited to him than I'd ever be.

Luca glances at his phone and chuckles as he picks it up. He stares at it for a moment and shakes his head before holding it out for me. "The code is my grandmother's birthday, paired with my mother's. It's 327812." I frown and shoot him a questioning look, but he merely smiles at me with the kind of patience he's never shown me before. "Take it."

"I… um… why would I—"

"Just do as I tell you to, Valentina."

My hand trembles as I take his phone from him, my heart racing. I feel sick to my stomach at the thought of him with someone else.

"Check who my last call was to," he says, his voice soft.

I look up sharply, but he merely tilts his head and looks at me, his eyes filled with something I can't quite describe.

My fingers tremble as I put in his code and unlock his phone. Part of me doesn't want to do this for fear of what I'll find, but a larger part of me needs to know.

"Sierra," I whisper, profound relief washing over me.

Luca takes a step closer to me and cups my face, tipping my head up toward his. "I don't know what's going through your mind, Valentina, but I can tell you this much: I will never, ever, cheat on you. I will never mistreat you or wrong you, you hear me? I know I fucked up in the past. I treated you harshly, and I went way too fucking far when you quit your job. I know, baby. But all of that? It was only because I didn't want to lose you. I will never do anything that will make you want to walk away from me."

I look into his eyes, taking in the fierce sincerity in them. "Why are you being like this?" I ask, my voice trembling. We agreed that we wouldn't fall in love, so why is he looking at me that way?

His thumb brushes over my lips and he smiles, but his gaze is unfocused, as though he's lost in a memory of his own. "Because I recognize the worries in the questions you refuse to ask. I recognize the damage of betrayal, Valentina. I don't know who he was, and I don't want to know either, but I'm not him. For as long as we're married, there won't be anybody but you."

A different kind of jealousy settles deep in my stomach. "Who was she?"

Luca pulls his hand away and smiles humorlessly. “Someone who will stay in the past, which is exactly where I expect you to leave the man who made you doubt me over a simple conversation with my sister. The way you looked at me… that wasn’t damage inflicted on you by your parents. It was more than that. I’m not him, baby, so don’t look at me with so much mistrust.”

How could there be a woman I don’t know about? This must either have happened before we met, or he managed to keep a relationship hidden both from me and his family. Something about the pain in his voice guts me.

“Stop hiding from me, okay?” He looks away and musses up his hair. “If you keep this up, we don’t stand a chance of convincing our families we’re in love.”

I blush and look away. It’s odd to be standing here with him in this situation. He’s the man I loved to hate, but it’s starting to look like that hatred was misplaced, and I don’t know what to make of it. “Understood,” I murmur, unsure of what else to say.

He smiles and brushes my hair out of my face tenderly. “Wait here,” he tells me, before walking away, leaving my heart pounding. This is part of the reason I’ve been staying away. He makes me feel weak and vulnerable, and I never want to feel that way again. It only leads to heartache.

Luca walks back holding a pair of pink soft fuzzy slippers, and he kneels in front of me. “I bought these for you. Wear them at home, Valentina. Don’t just walk around barefoot,” he tells me as he lifts my foot carefully and places the slipper on it. “The floor is cold, after all.”

I stare down at him in disbelief, unable to keep my heart from being unaffected. Why does he treat me this way, when our marriage was meant to be pure business? “I thought you hated pink?”

He laughs and looks away as he runs a hand through his hair, the gesture oddly… *shy*. “I do, but you love it.”

Luca turns back to the stove and switches it back on. “So you do know how to cook,” I murmur, a soft chuckle escaping my lips.

He looks over his shoulder and smiles at me sheepishly. I never thought Luca could be *cute*, yet that’s exactly what he is. “The chef had a day off, and I didn’t feel like ordering something. I can only make this one stew, to be honest. It’s extremely hard to mess it up, so don’t worry about me blowing up our kitchen.”

Our kitchen. He keeps saying and doing things that make my heart race. When we first got married, I was so certain I'd never fall in love again, that this marriage would be all business. If Luca had continued to treat me the way he used to, everything would've been fine, but he seems insistent on breaking down my walls, and I don't know how to stop him. With each passing day, he's winning over more parts of me that never should have been his for the taking.

"Have you heard from your mother?" he asks.

"No. I've called her a few times, but she's refusing to take my calls. Usually, I'd go stay at home once a month or so. Do you… would you come with me? I wonder if seeing us together would put her mind at ease. My mother isn't the easiest person to deal with, but I don't want her to worry about me."

Luca glances over his shoulder and nods. "Sure," he says, before looking back at the pan in front of him. "Whatever you want, baby."

I stare at him, unable to figure him out. Three years seemed like such a long time, but I'm starting to worry it won't be nearly enough for me.

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Chapter Thirty-Eight

VALENTINA

"How could you do this to me?" Sierra asks, her gaze filled with torment. "To both of us," she adds, before elbowing Raven, who is seated next to her.

They showed up the moment Luca left for poker night, and I have a feeling I'm not leaving this living room until they've interrogated me to their satisfaction. Somehow, I was more ready for Grandma Anne than I was for this.

We've spoken in our group chat in the days since Raven's fashion show, but other than congratulating me, they didn't say much else. I thought they were letting it slide because they know how awkward I get when asked to speak about my private life, but it looks like I underestimated them. They were just waiting until they could corner me in person.

“I… I’m sorry for not telling you,” I murmur, my cheeks flushed. The idea of letting them down breaks my heart. I know it’s difficult for them to accept that I have a hard time letting people in, and throughout the years, they’ve always forgiven me when I went through periods of involuntarily pushing them away, but even I can admit that keeping something this big from them is too much. I must have made them feel like we aren’t real friends, and I don’t know how to fix it.

“Luca and I agreed to keep it quiet until we officially told your grandmother, but I should’ve just told you in secret. I’m really sorry.”

Sierra narrows her eyes at me. “That’s not what I’m worried about. How could you have deprived me of an opportunity to throw you a bachelorette party? Isn’t it enough that Raven got married in a rush and I was deprived of my maid of honor duties? How could you do the same thing to me?”

Raven bites back a smile and shakes her head. “Stop messing with her,” she tells Sierra, before turning to me. “Besides, we both know it’s me you would have chosen as your maid of honor, right?”

I stare at them doe-eyed and breathe a sigh of relief when I realize they aren’t mad at me at all. “You two… you had me so worried. I thought for sure you wouldn’t forgive me for being so secretive this time. Do you have any idea how many times I replayed this conversation in my mind?”

Sierra and Raven glance at each other, and then they smile. “Luca was a mess when you quit your job,” Raven says. “It was obvious that there was no way he was letting you go. This doesn’t surprise me in the least.”

Luca, a mess? I can’t even imagine that. I bet he was simply pissed that I deviated from his carefully laid out plans. He doesn’t like change, and I definitely caught him by surprise.

Sierra looks into my eyes and crosses her legs over each other as she leans in. “So, is it real? Your marriage?”

I look down in an attempt to hide my shock, my heart racing. What do I say to that? It’s one thing to keep our marriage from them, but it’s something else entirely to lie outright. I can’t breach our contract, though. What do I do?

“I see,” Raven says, a smile on her face. “You think it isn’t, huh? That’s cute.” I look up at her in confusion, and she grins at me. “Did you two decide to stick it out for three years, until Luca gets his inheritance?”

I take a deep breath and look away. “I can’t answer that,” I tell her honestly, my words conveying the truth I can’t articulate.

“When you sleep with him, does it feel like more than sex?” she asks, her eyes twinkling.

Sierra groans in disgust and wraps her hands over her ears for a moment, before clearly deciding she wants to know after all, because she drops one of her hands while keeping one ear covered.

“Um, yes,” I admit, my cheeks no doubt bright red.

“Does he get jealous and possessive of you?”

I think back to the way he reacted when Theo dropped by my desk, the new identification documents he got me, and the wedding rings. “He does, but that’s just Luca.”

Sierra chuckles and shakes her head. “No, Val. That’s Luca when it comes to *you*. He doesn’t give a shit about anyone else. Do you remember when we got caught breaking into Xavier’s office? I’m his sister, and he left me behind bars when we got arrested. If you hadn’t been with me, he wouldn’t have come at all. He’d just have left Xavier to deal with it.”

I look away and try my best to suppress the tinge of hope I feel. I shouldn’t want Luca to care about me at all — that isn’t what we agreed on. So why does it feel so good to think he does?

“Oh well,” Raven says. “If your marriage isn’t real, he won’t mind if we go out tonight, will he? Sierra is right. I never had a bachelorette party, and neither did you.”

I pin her down with a stare. “Luca might not care, but Ares will.”

Raven merely grins. “Do you really think the boys will leave poker night? They’ll never know.”

The subsequent grin that lights up Sierra’s face spells trouble, and I really should’ve known better than to give into them.

Yet somehow, I find myself in a club an hour later, wearing one of the dresses Raven designed for me. I’m feeling buzzed and haven’t stopped smiling, courtesy of the wine we drank while we got ready together. I wonder if they knew that I needed a breather, a night with just my two closest friends, and no worries whatsoever.

“Come on,” Sierra says, twirling me around. She gets behind me and wraps her arms around my waist, the two of us dancing like a drunk and somewhat deranged couple. Giggles escape my lips every few seconds as Raven busts out some truly dreadful dance moves in front of me. What is she even doing? Is she pretending to be a robot? It’s ridiculous to see a woman as beautiful as she is acting so silly, but this is exactly what I love

about her. Sierra and Raven have totally got me sandwiched, but I'm enjoying every second of it.

"Val?"

An arm wraps around my waist, and I tense as I look up into sky blue eyes that I remember all too well.

"Ben?" My heart starts to ache at the mere sight of him, the pain feeling fresh all over again. It's been eight years, but the betrayal feels brand new. "What are you doing here?"

"Do you know him?" Raven asks protectively. I glance back at my friends and nod, not wanting to worry them.

Last I heard, Ben had moved to Australia for work. What is he doing back here? Why did I have to run into him here, now?

His eyes roam over my face, his gaze filled with the same torment I feel. "I missed you," he murmurs into my ear. "I was hoping I'd find you eventually. I only got back a few days ago, and here you are. How could it not be fate?"

I push away from him and try my hardest to look unaffected by his words. If this is fate, then mine must be rotten. "I'd have much preferred it if you'd stayed wherever the hell you came from," I snap, my heart racing.

Ben wraps his hand around my wrist, and I try to shake it loose instantly, but he's holding on too tight. "Val, please, can we talk? If nothing else, please let me apologize."

Sierra starts to reach for me, but then she stops and steps back, her eyes wide. It doesn't take me long to realize why.

"How about you take your fucking hands off her before you lose them altogether?" Luca threatens. I look back to find my husband standing behind me, fury blazing through his eyes.

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Chapter Thirty-Nine

LUCA

I stare down at the dance floor from the glass-encased platform in Hunter's office, Ares and Xavier by my side.

Xavier glances at his brother in annoyance, but Hunter merely shakes his head. "Don't look at me," he groans. "I called you guys the second they walked into my club, and security has been keeping an eye on them all night. I had nothing to do with this."

I frown at Xavier, surprised by his anger. Why is *he* so annoyed that the girls are out clubbing? He catches me looking and raises his brows. "What?" he snaps. "They ruined poker night. Don't tell me they didn't know you two would come here if you found out. I bet Sierra came here because she knows my brother owns this place. She's no doubt trying to get on my damn nerves again."

I ignore him and watch as Valentina, Sierra and Raven dance together, the three of them laughing in such a carefree manner that it brings a smile to my lips. When is the last time I saw Valentina laugh that way? I don't think she ever has — not around me.

Ares runs a hand through his hair and groans before heading to the door, clearly intent on taking his wife home, but I place my hand on his arm and stop him in place. "Let them be," I tell him, my voice soft. "They look like they're having fun."

My eyes trail back toward my wife, my heart overflowing with an emotion I can't quite decipher. It feels like heartache and regret, mixed with a tinge of jealousy. I wish I could've made her laugh like that.

I never wondered how much she must've missed out on by working for me. I never gave her a chance to have a social life, because she was always on call. She spent her twenties working long hours with me, never once taking a real break. Even her holidays were spent with her family.

I suppose that's why she quit her job so suddenly. Somehow, I didn't truly understand it then, but I see it now. It's in the way she laughs, the way she twirls on the dance floor and leans into my sister. She finally gathered the courage to choose herself, and I clipped her wings the first chance I got.

A chill runs down my spine when I see a man approach my wife. He speaks to the security guard near them, and much to my fucking annoyance, he's let through. The second his hand wraps around Valentina's waist, I'm out the door, my blood boiling.

It only took a split-second for me to realize that she knows this guy, and that look in her eyes told me everything I need to know. She may have spent nearly every second with me at work, but she clearly made time for whoever the fuck that dude is. They have history, and I'm going to make sure he stays in the past.

He's got his hand wrapped around my wife's wrist as I walk up to them, and I nearly see fucking red. "How about you take your fucking hands off her before you lose them altogether?" I snap, yanking his hand away.

My arm wraps around Valentina's waist, and I pull her into me. Seconds later, security catches on and escorts the guy she was with away. Valentina's arms might be wrapped around my neck, but her eyes are on that man's back as he walks away.

"Valentina," I growl. "Who the fuck was that?"

She looks back at me, clearly flustered and no doubt a little drunk. “No one,” she says, before forcing one of those dreadful smiles onto her face. Why is it that I always get these fake smiles, but Sierra and Raven get genuine laughter?

“It didn’t look like nothing.”

She looks up at me with such vulnerability in her eyes as she tightens her grip on me, her body pressed flush against mine. “Luca, it’s fine. It’s nothing,” she reassures me.

“We’re going home,” I tell her before reaching for her and lifting her into my arms.

She gasps and looks around. “What about Sierra and Raven?”

“Ares will take them home,” I tell her as I carry her straight to the car.

Valentina is quiet as the divider between our driver and us rises, giving us some privacy. She glances at me with an expression that makes my jealousy boil over. She looks haunted and heartbroken, and I have no doubt the fucker she was just with is the cause of it. Is he the reason she told me she didn’t want love? Is he the reason she insists on ending our marriage in three years, no matter what?

“Who is he?” I ask, my voice soft. I’ve never seen her look at a man that way. She’s never looked at *me* that way.

“Luca,” she murmurs as she turns toward me. In one swift move, I pull her onto my lap, her short dress riding up all the way to her hips. She looks at me like I’m all she can see, as though the man that had her looking so heartbroken ceases to exist when I’ve got my arms wrapped around her. I want nothing more than for that to be true, but I know it can’t be.

My hands wrap around her waist, and she inhales shakily as the tips of her fingers trail up my chest. Her fingers glide over the back of my neck as she pulls me in for a kiss, and my resolve wavers. I should pull away and continue questioning her, but she makes me so fucking weak. She’s doing this on purpose, no doubt. It’s a trap, but I’m willing prey.

I groan when I feel her soft tongue brush against mine, her touch slow yet urgent. She tugs at my jacket, and I shrug out of it before sliding my hands up her thighs and underneath her dress.

“Valentina,” I groan. “Answer the fucking question.”

She leans back a little to look at me, the lust in her eyes making way for despondency. She lifts her hand and brushes her fingers over my cheek, a

weak smile on her lips. “He’s the reason you’ll never have to worry about me falling in love with you.”

My stomach drops as I tear my gaze away from her, longing and heartache warring for dominance. It never even occurred to me that the heart I pretended not to want was always out of my reach anyway. “Why are you doing this to me?” I whisper. “Why do you drive me fucking crazy at every turn? Do you enjoy seeing me suffer? Is this payback?”

She cups my face, her thumb brushing over my lips for a moment before she leans in and kisses me hungrily, as though she’s trying to erase the words I should’ve left unspoken. It’s so easy to lose myself in her, but if I do, I’ll never recover the parts of me that she’s taking.

I pull her closer and kiss her deeply, taking my time to tease her until I’ve got her writhing in my lap, her hips betraying her desire. “Luca,” she moans against my lips. I’ll never tire of hearing her moan my name. It’s such a fucking rush. Nothing comes close to it.

I can’t be the only one who feels this way. I can’t be the only one falling. “Valentina,” I whisper, needing more of her than she’s willing to give me. “Look at me.”

Her breathing is uneven as she lifts her face, soft pants escaping her beautiful lips as she reaches for my shirt. “Good girl,” I whisper. “I don’t want you looking at anyone but me, you hear me? Don’t you fucking dare even think about anyone but me.”

She nods, a hint of vulnerability shining through. “Only you, Luca,” she promises me. My hand disappears between her legs, and a smile makes its way onto my lips when I realize she’s already wet. This is all I need. That look in her eyes… as though I fill her mind to the brim, pushing out every other thought.

My wife unbuttons my suit pants and grabs my cock, her eyes falling closed for a moment as a wicked smile lights up her face. “Do you want it?” I ask her, my voice low.

She nods at me, her gaze pleading, and I can’t help but smirk. “Then ride me, baby. Take what you want. I’m all yours, Valentina.”

Her expression morphs into something that looks like a whole lot more than lust, and it makes my heart race in a way it never has before. Our eyes lock as she sinks down on me slowly, taking all of me. “Yeah,” I groan. “Just like that, baby. Take your husband’s cock, just like that.”

She rides me slowly, my hand wrapped in her hair, soft moans escaping her lips. She’s a fucking sight to behold, and she’s all mine.

I just need to make sure she never forgets it.

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Chapter Forty

LUCA

I try my hardest to appear disappointed as Stephen Harris, my Chief Operating Officer, tells the board that he's retiring. It's about fucking time. I can't wait to see my wife's eyes light up when I tell her the news. She's perfect for his role, and truth be told, she's been doing this pig's fucking job for years now. It's about time she gets recognition for it.

This news is the only thing that's salvaging my shitty morning. I couldn't sleep last night, my mind replaying Valentina's words.

He's the reason you'll never have to worry about me falling in love with you.

Is this some form of karma? Is it payback for tormenting her for years, for not realizing what I had? She's my wife now, yet it some ways, it feels

like she'll never fully be mine. She's given me her body, but that's not all I want.

"I understand this may be shocking to some of you, but worry not. I'll stay on until my replacement is fully trained, of course," Stephen tells us.

Not a single person in this room is surprised. If anything, we all agree that this is long overdue. Everything about this man is long-winded. Even the way he speaks is irritatingly slow. Why the fuck does he talk that way?

"It would be so hard to pass down years' worth of knowledge, but I have the perfect candidate in mind."

I raise my brow in surprise. Everyone at this table knows there's only one qualified staff member, and it's my wife. They know as well as I do who has actually been doing his job.

"Please allow me to introduce you to my son, Ben. I recently hired him to join my team with the expectation that he'd take on my role eventually."

Stephen's secretary opens the board room's door, and in walks a familiar face. I sit up in my chair at the head of the table and clench my jaws. It's him. The man Valentina was talking to at the club. What the fuck is he doing in my board room?

His eyes meet mine as he pauses next to his father, recognition apparent in them. For a moment, he looks pained, but he swiftly schools his features. So he remembers seeing me with Valentina, huh?

"My son was the COO of Feria Finance in Australia for years. When he told me he was ready to come home, I knew I could safely retire and hand over the reins. I trust that you'll agree that his work experience is highly relevant and exactly what we're after."

I see my board members nod and start to tap my finger impatiently. What in the fuck is going on here? The looks Stephen is exchanging with everyone around me tells me that he's buttered them all up. This plan of his has been in the making for a while, and I'm caught off-guard. That rarely happens.

"I'll have to look into his background, but provided he checks out, we could consider him a candidate," I say carefully. Until I inherit my shares, I'm merely another employee, just like everyone else here, and they love to remind me of it every chance they get. I can't let my anger show, or they'll push for this asshole's appointment that much harder.

Stephen smiles at me, clearly pleased with my answer. "That settles that then. He can take over as soon as I'm formally retired. I'll start training him

at once."

I lean back in my seat and pin him down with a cold stare. "I said I'm willing to consider him as a candidate, but he isn't the only one. I'd like to nominate someone myself, and I'm sure our other board members have recommendations of their own too."

Stephen looks surprised, as though he genuinely thought this would be a done deal. "Another candidate?" He frowns, making him look even more like a fucking pig.

"Valentina."

I don't miss the way *Ben* flinches, his eyes widening. Who the fuck is this idiot? If he truly was the COO of Feria, then he clearly is qualified for this role, yet it doesn't look like he's done his homework. He should've known he'd be going up against Valentina. Clearly, he's an entitled lazy fucker, just like his father.

"B-but she's your secretary!" Philip sputters. "How could she… how could she ever be COO?"

I frown at him and lean in, resting my elbow on the table. "How could she not? She's already doing your job, isn't she? Why not recognize and compensate her for it?"

His face blanches before it swiftly reddens, the sight truly amusing. It brings me a sense of peace to know that *Ben* is probably going to age just like his father did. How utterly unappealing.

"We have two nominees," James Lee, my Chief Technology Officer, says. "So I suppose we should put them to the test."

Murmurs dance across the room as everyone discusses amongst themselves. All the while, I study *Ben*. Even his name is dumb. It reminds me of a weird cartoon I used to watch as a kid. My gaze is clearly unnerving because he starts to fidget, his hands running over his suit, then his hair. His foot begins to tap, and he glances back and forth between me and his shoes.

So he's a pussy, huh? I smile, pleased. I'm not sure what Valentina ever saw in this fucker, but perhaps this is my chance to ensure she forgets all about him. Sometimes our memories are skewed, making the past seem sweeter than it was. Maybe all she needs is a good dose of reality.

"Let's not overcomplicate this. They're both equally qualified, so the one who brings the biggest client into our hedge fund will get the job," I say, knowing Valentina can easily get it done. There's no one she doesn't

know in this industry, and she's well-respected. This should be easy for her, especially when competing with someone whose network is primarily in Australia.

"I think that's fair," James says.

The rest of the board nods in agreement, and I rise to my feet. "You each have two months to close your deals. Make them count."

The door slams closed behind me, my mask slipping out of place. I didn't think I'd ever see his fucking face again, yet here he is, in my fucking office. Is life taunting me? What kind of fucking bullshit is this?

Just the thought of Valentina looking at him the way she did last night makes fury dance across my skin. I'm tense as I walk back to my office, a sense of unease washing over me as I lay eyes on my wife.

She's typing at her desk and pauses suddenly as she lifts her hand a little, her wedding ring sparkling in the light. I secretly slipped it onto her finger this morning, unable to resist. I was hoping it'd take her a little longer to notice. It's crazy how badly I want the world to know that she's mine. I want to mark her as off-limits, now more so than ever before. The more she gives me, the more scared I grow of ever losing her. This was meant to be a simple deal with an end date in sight, but every single one of my intentions went out the window the first time she fell asleep in my arms. There's no fucking way I'm letting her go.

She looks up and catches me staring, a sweet smile finding its way onto her lips. I was worried that she'd be reminiscing about Ben, but she seems fine. If anything, she seems sweeter today. Somehow, I feel a little closer to her, as though she's lowered her walls just a little for me. Will seeing him at the office undo the progress we've made?

I walk up to her and bend over, my hand wrapping into her hair as I steal a quick kiss. I thought she'd push me away and reprimand me, but she gives in and wraps her arms around my neck, kissing me back. She has no idea what she does to me. It's fucking insane. "We're at work," she murmurs against my lips. "Anyone could see."

"Maybe I want them to."

Valentina pulls away and throws me a warning look, but the way her eyes twinkle negates her seriousness. "Don't you dare," she says, the edges of her lips tipping up into a small smile.

My eyes drop to her empty ring finger, and she holds her ring up between her thumb and index finger. "Did you put this on me, or am I

losing my mind? I told you I wouldn't wear it to the office."

I smile at her, my heart heavy. "Maybe I just want everyone to know that you're mine. Can you blame me?"

Her eyes widen, and a gorgeous blush stains her cheeks, making my heart race. She's so painfully beautiful.

"Valentina," I murmur. "There's something I need to tell you." She raises her brows in question. "Stephen is resigning, and I nominated you as a candidate for COO."

She jumps up from her chair and closes the distance between us, her hands pressed against my chest and her face so fucking close. Is she daring me to steal another kiss? "Please tell me you aren't joking, Luca. I won't forgive you if you are."

I wrap my hands around her waist and drop my forehead to hers, breathing her in for a moment. I'm like an addict, getting high off her fucking scent like a fucking fool. I pull away a little to look at her and shake my head. "It's true, baby."

Her eyes widen, and she rises to her tiptoes, kissing me with no regard for our environment. I wish I could just carry her into my office and fuck her until the unease I feel is put to rest, but I can't. Whether I like it or not, I have to face the music.

"Valentina," I murmur against her lips. "You aren't the only candidate."

She takes a step away from me when we hear footsteps around the corner, and I sigh, wishing I could just send a company memo informing everyone that she's mine. I hate sneaking around with her. "What do you mean? Who else could possibly —"

She looks past me, shock and torment flashing through her eyes. "Ben," she whispers. My stomach twists painfully, every fiber of my being violently responding to his name being on her lips.

He pauses in front of her desk, and I move to stand next to my wife. "He is the other candidate," I tell her reluctantly.

The regret in his eyes mirrors hers, and it's clear the history between them left its mark. How do I erase it? How do I erase every single fucking trace of him, when he's standing right here, looking at my wife like he wants her back?

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Chapter Forty-One

VALENTINA

"Val," Ben says, his gaze filled with the same regret he showed me last night. "Can we talk?"

Luca tenses beside me, his hand brushing against mine. I look up at him, and he sends me a pleading look that's so unlike him that I can't look away. It's like he's silently asking me not to go with Ben, to stay right here, with him.

"Val?" Ben repeats, snapping me out of my daze. I turn toward him, surprise rendering me speechless for a moment. I didn't think I'd ever have to see him again, yet here he is, showing up twice in the span of 24 hours. It feels ominous, almost as though life is trying to remind me what would happen if I allowed myself to give into the feelings Luca is eliciting in me. It feels like a reminder that good things aren't meant for me.

“What are you doing here?” I ask him, my voice steady. I was shocked and emotional last night, but looking at him right now, I can’t help but feel like he pales in comparison to my husband. He’s inferior in every single way, and not just because he’s a cheating asshole.

“He’s Stephen’s son,” Luca informs me, “and the candidate you’re competing with.”

My eyes widen, and I grit my teeth. Back when we dated, he used to brag about the amazing senior position his father had at some big conglomerate. I’m surprised I never connected the dots. I always knew Stephen had a son who lived overseas, but I should’ve looked into it more.

I smile humorlessly, my stomach in knots. I’ve worked myself to the bone for the mere opportunity to be considered as COO, and he walks in here just like that. Seeing him hurts, but knowing he’ll take more from me than he already has kills me.

“Please, Val. Can we talk? It looks like we’ll be working together for at least a little while. Don’t you think it’d be best to—”

“To *what*?” I snap. “To reminisce? What for?”

He runs a hand through his hair and looks at me with that same look that used to make my heart race. Longing. Desire. Reverence. It’s what made me give him a chance in the first place. He didn’t care about my background, or the fact that I didn’t fit in amongst the rich students that surrounded him. He was the first person who made me feel seen, and letting him in was my downfall.

“How is your mother?”

A chill runs down my spine as I fight the urge to lose my temper. My pain turns into hatred instantly, and it takes all of me to force a smile.

Luca crosses his arms and shoots Ben a cold stare. “If you want to discuss personal matters, I suggest you do it outside of working hours,” Luca says. His tone is perfectly polite, but I notice the fury he tries to hide. I have no doubt he recognized Ben, and there’s no way I can evade his questions any longer.

I don’t want him to know. It took me years to grow into the person I’ve become, and I don’t want him to find out that it’s all a charade.

“It’s fine,” I tell my husband. Ben is right. We’ll be working together, and we’re competing for the same job. It’s best to get this conversation out of the way. “Please follow me, Ben.”

Luca tenses and wraps his hand around my wrist, his grip tight. He looks into my eyes, his expression unreadable. “Don’t,” he murmurs.

I smile at him reassuringly, and his expression falls as he lets go of me. Luca grits his teeth, and for a moment, I hesitate. Something about his demeanor makes my heart ache. He looks defeated, somehow.

He watches me as I lead Ben to one of the meeting rooms, and I can’t help but look back at him. The way he’s staring at me makes me feel like I’m wronging him somehow. Am I?

I shake my head when I realize that thoughts of Luca are occupying my mind even as I sit down opposite Ben. I always thought I’d be weak and pathetic when I eventually ran into Ben again, but as it turns out, that isn’t true in the slightest. It isn’t heartache I feel. It’s disappointment and shame. Someone like him never should have had the power to hurt me.

“I never forgot about you, Val. I’ve been trying to reach out to you for years. You dropped out without a single word and changed your phone number.”

“Yet you still didn’t get the hint, huh?”

He flinches, and I sigh, annoyed. I’m not sure what I’m most mad about — the fact that he reminds me of the weak girl I used to be, or that I’m going to have to compete with him when he has an unfair advantage. What I do know is that the lingering feelings I have for him aren’t even remotely close to being love. It’s resentment littered with humiliation.

“I’ve never regretted anything more, Val. Just seeing you makes my heart race the way it used to. Surely you feel it too? I’ve never been able to love someone the way I loved you. I never got over you, Val. If you truly had moved on, you wouldn’t be treating me with such coldness. So long as you’re mad at me, I still have a chance, don’t I?”

I frown at him, my anger rising. “It’s been eight years, Ben. Why would I treat you warmly when you walked in here out of nowhere and are competing with me for my dream job? I see your ego is still as inflated as ever. Who do you think you are? The only reason I agreed to speak with you is so I could put these delusions to rest. I have no interest in reminiscing.”

He looks at me as though he doesn’t believe me, and I suppose his disbelieve is warranted. He’s right. I do feel resentment and hate, and for a few moments, my heart did waver. Seeing him made my feelings come rushing back, but it was *very* fleeting.

“Is it because of Luca Windsor? He’s the one that was with you on the dance floor, wasn’t he? Are you seeing him?”

I grit my teeth for a moment as I try to decide how to answer him. “Didn’t you see the women I was with? They’re Luca’s sister and sister-in-law. Do you really think they’d be left fully unattended?”

Somehow, I don’t want to hide our marriage right now. It’s petty, but I want Ben to know that I ended up marrying a man far better than he could ever hope to be, but if I provoke him in that manner, he’ll just have the last laugh when we divorce. It isn’t worth it.

He looks away for a moment and nods, as though that makes perfect sense. I suppose it’s too hard for him to even imagine Luca and me truly being together. It makes me feel far more bitter than it should.

“I want you back,” he says, his voice soft. “I was young and foolish, and I didn’t realize what I had. I know I don’t deserve it, but there’s nothing I won’t do for another chance with you.”

I frown at him, irritated. “Dating you was, and always will be, one of the biggest mistakes I’ve ever made.”

I’m on the verge of telling him I’m married, but if anyone found out about us now, it’d hurt my chances. Nepotism is all fine when it’s Stephen and his son, but it’d be a different story if anyone found out about Luca and me.

“Would you give me another chance if I walk away from this job? All I’m asking for is dinner. Just give me one evening with you.”

A startled laugh escapes my lips, and his eyes widen in surprise. “You pompous entitled ass,” I tell him, my anger overflowing. “The fact that you think you stand a chance at getting this job when *I’m* your opponent means you don’t know me at all. I don’t need you to walk away because you pose no real threat to me, you self-righteous, condescending asshole.”

I didn’t think that I’d have so much clarity when facing him, and I wish I’d been this decisive last night. It’s true that he reminds me of the reasons I’m no longer looking for love, but it isn’t because I have feelings for *him*. It’s because he reminds me of the inevitable pain that comes with opening your heart up to someone.

I roll my eyes as I rise to my feet. “I never want to speak about this again,” I warn him. “You and I are done, and it’ll remain that way.” I feel his gaze on me as I walk out, but for the first time since we broke up, I feel a sense of closure.

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Chapter Forty-Two

LUCA

"What do you think of Azure as a target?" Valentina asks, her tone as matter-of-factly as always. I took her out on a date under the guise of helping her prepare for the battle she's about to face, and it's fucking ridiculous. I shouldn't have to come up with excuses to take my own wife out on a date, yet here I am. With each passing day, she makes me want more. Valentina makes me crave things I swore I'd never want.

I run a hand through my hair and take a steadying breath. "It's an option, but they're known for having a heavily diversified portfolio. They'd invest, but not to the level you'd need."

She is still the exact same person she's always been — heartless and cold as ice. What I thought was her biggest asset has swiftly become the biggest obstacle. Am I crazy for wanting her to look at me with that warm

gaze of hers outside of bed? Have I truly lost my mind? I must have, because I want all of her.

"I wish they hadn't banned me from participating. I'd have invested my own funds," I murmur.

Valentina shakes her head. "No. I can do this. I don't need you to—"

"— I know," I cut her off, my hand wrapping over hers. "I know you don't need me, but I *want* to be the one you rely on. I'm your *husband*. Sometimes it seems like you forget that."

She pulls her hand away from mine and places it in her lap, her eyes on her plate. She seems colder lately, and I can't help but wonder if it's because of Ben.

"Luca," she says, her tone apprehensive. "This marriage is temporary. I can't keep relying on you. Doesn't it feel like our time together is flying by? I need to learn to stand on my own two feet."

I look away and grit my teeth. "Why are you so eager to leave me?"

"I'm not," she says, her tone emotionless. "But like any business deal, this will come to an end, eventually. I think it's best that we don't complicate things more than we already have. I don't want our lives to be intertwined any further. Once this is all over, I want a life of my own, without being tied down by the past. For as long as I can remember, my life hasn't been *mine*. I've always lived for someone else, and I don't want to do that anymore."

I glance at my wife with a heavy heart. This should be music to my ears, so why do her words bring me such torment?

"Elena and Alexander Kennedy," I tell her, my voice soft. "Alec is an old friend of mine, and I know he's been looking for a new fund to invest his family's capital in. His previous firm didn't perform the way he expected, so he'd be receptive to our offer. They're throwing a charity ball soon, so we can pitch our offer then."

She looks surprised, the gears in her mind turning. "Brilliant," she murmurs eventually. "They'd have enough capital to beat whoever Ben brings in."

I clench my jaw, annoyed at the mere mention of him. I don't want his dumb name on her beautiful lips. She drives me fucking mental, and meanwhile, she's utterly unaffected. My eyes drop to her empty ring finger, and I sigh. Every night since Ben showed up, I've secretly slipped her wedding ring onto her finger, and every morning, she's taken it back off.

She told me she'd wear it outside of the office, and I can't tell if she's genuinely just forgetting about it lately, or if she just doesn't want to be seen wearing it.

I stare at her for a moment, taking in her beauty. She's been by my side for eight years, but throughout that time, she never felt a thing for me. Do I even stand a chance at all?

"Valentina, what did you mean when you told me that Ben was the reason I'd never have to worry about you falling in love with me?" Ever since he showed up, she's felt further out of reach than usual. I've been trying my hardest to pretend that I'm unaffected by the way he looks at her, the way he hovers around her, but I'm at my breaking point. "Do you still have feelings for him?"

She looks caught off-guard, and I take a shaky breath, fearing her answer. "No," she tells me, her tone firm. "I don't."

I stare at her, trying my best to figure out if she's being honest or not. "Then what did you mean? Give me the truth. We promised each other that we'd communicate, didn't we? This is important to me. I need to know."

She looks into my eyes, her gaze turning more and more vulnerable by the second. I hate that someone other than me can make her look that way. "It's complicated, Luca," she says, exhaling shakily. "Ben is… to me, he's proof that men like you will never stay with women like me. He's a reminder that I sorely needed, that's all."

I run a hand through my hair and take a deep breath. "Valentina, what the fuck does that even mean?"

She looks away, her eyes falling closed for a moment. "It doesn't matter. You and I have been very clear on what we are and what we aren't from the very start. Why are we even talking about this?"

She still won't let me in. Each time I think we've made progress, we end up taking ten steps back. I should be grateful that she keeps the boundaries between us in place so well, but I fucking hate it. That damn contract we signed will be my downfall.

I grit my teeth for a moment. "It matters to me. From the moment he's shown up, it's been driving me crazy. You once told me that thoughts of me being with Natalia tormented you, didn't you?" She nods, and I tear my gaze off her as I empty my wine glass. "That's what it's like for me. I keep wondering what kind of hold he must have over you, and it worries me. It's really fucking hard for me to admit that, baby, but I'm trying. He fucking

bothers me. Maybe I have no right to feel the way I do, but I can't help myself. I hate it when you so much as mention his name, and I can't stop thinking about what you told me. Why is he the reason you won't love *me*? The way I see it, it can only mean that you're still in love with *him*."

She stares at her plate, her gaze unfocused for a moment before she lifts her head. I've never seen her look at me with quite this much uncertainty in her eyes. "Will you snap out of the funk you're in if I tell you what happened between Ben and me?"

I nod at her, my heart heavy. I don't know what she's done to me, but I'm not myself. It looks like she's noticed it too.

Valentina sighs and looks away. "I told you about my parents, right? Growing up, my mother always told me to never trust rich men, and to always remember my station in life. I had no intention of falling in love at all, let alone with the exact kind of guy my mother had always warned me against, but Ben was relentless. We met in college, and he'd find every excuse to be around me, whether it was joining the same elective classes or showing up at my part-time job at the coffeeshop on campus. He was just everywhere, and all he'd ever ask was to take me on a date. He seemed harmless, and he really took his time to charm me. Eventually, I gave in, and we started dating. I really thought I'd found true happiness of my own, and for a couple of months, it felt like I escaped my mother's shadow. It's funny, looking back at it. How could I truly have believed that I could be happy?" She laughs humorlessly, and the mere sight of her breaks my heart. No one deserves to be loved more than she does.

"But then my mother was in an accident, and I had to drop out to take care of my grandmother and her. Ben assured me that we'd be able to do long-distance and that nothing would change, and I believed him. He made it easy. He called me every day, and he texted me all the time, too. I truly believed that I was the only one for him, and that our relationship was strong enough to survive anything. So on his birthday, I saved up enough money to go see him. I thought I'd surprise him, and that he'd be happy to see me…"

She inhales shakily and lowers her gaze. "I walked into his bedroom to find him on top of one of our mutual friends. It devastated me, but it was more than simple betrayal. It was proof of everything my mother had warned me about. I thought my life would be different, that what happened to her would never happen to me, yet the first relationship I was ever in

ended the exact way she'd told me it would. I think that might have been when I truly stopped believing in love."

She looks out the window and sighs. "There truly is nothing for you to worry about. I don't have any feelings for him, Luca. Perhaps some lingering resentment, but that's it."

"I see," I murmur, unsure how to feel about her story. I thought it was difficult enough to compete with the beliefs her mother drilled into her mind, but to know she once rebelled against those constraints, only to be proven wrong? It'll be near impossible for me to make her see that I'm nothing like him. The betrayal she experienced runs deeper than the surface, and the heart I so desperately want may not have any room for me in it.

"What did you two talk about two weeks ago, when he first came to the office?" I wish she hadn't given him any of her time at all. Guilt flashes through her eyes, and I tense.

"He said he wants me back," she says, her voice soft.

My stomach fucking drops, thoughts of her with him filling my mind. The two of them might be competing for the same role, but because of that, they're seeing each other a whole lot more often than I'd like. What if a late work night turns into a conversation, forgiveness… a stolen kiss?

Would she moan his name in the same way? Would her lips part for him the way they do for me? Does he know her body better than I do? It's clear that he was her first love, but that's most likely not the only *first* he took. They say a woman never forgets her first love, and I'm starting to worry that it's true.

"Luca," she says, her tone gentle. I look up, keeping my face perfectly expressionless. "I told him he was crazy, and we argued. It isn't something to worry about, but I didn't want to lie to you about it."

"Does he know you're married?"

Her eyes widen a fraction, and she shakes her head. Of course he doesn't. She's been adamant that no one could ever find out. Was he one of the reasons why? She might tell me that all she feels for him is resentment, but there's a thin line between love and hate. The fact that she still feels anything at all when she looks at him worries me.

Our server clears the table, and we're both quiet as I get the bill. This isn't how I saw tonight going. My fingers brush against hers as we walk toward the exit, and she pulls away before I can even grab her hand, frustrating me even further. My own fucking wife won't even hold my hand

in public, and it pisses me off endlessly. She might say that she doesn't have any feelings for Ben, but he affected her enough to make her withdraw from me.

"Luca Windsor?"

Valentina tenses, her body going rigid, and I look back to find Miguel Garcia standing in front of the restaurant, his eyes moving from Valentina to me. He extends his hand, and I shake it hesitantly, confused as to why the CEO of the country's largest insurance firm is looking at my wife with such hostility. Does he not value those eyeballs of his?

"You're a hard man to track down, Luca," he tells me, before glancing back at Valentina. He raises a brow and smiles. "I've called your office several times and emailed your secretary, but for some reason, I'm always told your schedule is fully packed, no matter how much I offer to invest."

There's a hint of panic in Valentina's eyes as our eyes meet, and then she looks down. It's not like her to purposely ignore potential clients, especially ones we already have a business relationship with. What's this all about? She knows he's in charge of every single Windsor insurance policy. If he were to invest even a portion of his insurance funds in us, that could be a game changer.

The Garcia family is just as influential and vast as the Windsor family. Compared to their entire empire, Miguel and ReInsure are small fries — that's how powerful the Garcia family is. Miguel isn't the head of his family, but he's powerful enough to have been made CEO of one of their most profitable companies. He isn't someone I can take lightly.

I glance back at Miguel, only to find him staring at my wife. He's older, but even I can't deny he's handsome. First I have to deal with fucking *Ben*, and now this fucker appears out of nowhere. Maybe I don't keep my wife busy enough, if she has time to attract all these fucking fruit flies.

"You might not remember," he tells me, "but I still remember you sitting in my lap when you were much younger. I was friends with your father."

I grit my teeth. "Indeed, I don't remember. I'm not a sentimental person, Mr. Garcia, but there's nothing I hate more than people I don't know bringing up my parents."

He looks taken-aback and nods. "Very well, I can understand that." He reaches for his wallet and hands me a business card. "I gave your secretary

a business card when I ran into her a few months ago, but it's clear you never received it."

I stare at it and place my hand on Valentina's lower back. "It indeed looks like there's been a misunderstanding of some sort," I tell him, my voice soft despite my anger. "It appears you think Valentina is merely a secretary. You're mistaken. She is the one person I trust above anyone else, my right hand, my de facto co-CEO. If she didn't grant you a meeting, it would be for a reason. I don't need to know why, and quite frankly, I don't give a fuck. If she says no, it means no. I respect her opinion above all else, and I strongly suggest that you do the same."

My wife looks at me with such shock and appreciation that my heart wavers. Doesn't she realize how highly I think of her? Perhaps not. I never told her any of this, after all. Perhaps the words I left unspoken did more harm than I expected.

I lead her out the door, ready to just get my wife the fuck home. This entire night has been a complete fucking clusterfuck. I wanted to spend some time together, yet all it's done is make me feel further apart from her.

The valet hands me my keys, and I hold the door open for my wife, but she isn't looking at me. Her eyes are on Miguel.

I'm restless as I start the car and lean back for a moment. "First Ben, and now Miguel," I murmur, my eyes falling closed for a moment. "What is it that they have and I don't?"

Valentina turns toward me, her gaze tormented. "Luca," she says, her voice trembling. "It's not like that, I swear. Miguel… he is… he is my father."

I stare at her, wide-eyed. Miguel Garcia, the CEO of the country's largest insurance firm, is her *father*? How could that not have flagged in the countless background checks I ran?

There's only one way for this to have remained hidden from me. *My grandmother.* She must have known and chosen not to disclose it, but why?

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Chapter Forty-Three

LUCA

"What brings you here so early? Why didn't you bring Valentina?" my grandmother asks as she takes a seat opposite me at her dining table. Her staff serves both of us breakfast, but my appetite is nonexistent.

"She had an early meeting," I tell her honestly. "Besides, I didn't want her present for this conversation."

Grandma's sweet smile melts away, making way for the ruthlessness she normally reserves for those outside of our family. "I see," she says, waving her hand as an indication to continue.

"Miguel Garcia."

Her expression hardens, and she sighs. "CEO of ReInsure, yes?"

"Don't act ignorant," I tell her, impatient. I adore my grandmother as much as all of my other siblings do, but our relationship has always been

different. We've never been quite as close, in part, because unlike my siblings, I don't feel like she always has our best interests at heart. If she did, she'd never have asked me to get engaged to Natalia. It also doesn't sit well with me that she didn't push Ares towards his happiness sooner, when it was clear to all of us that the woman he really loved was *Raven*, and not her sister. I don't trust that she'd put our feelings and happiness above profit. My siblings are blinded by their love for her and gratitude for taking us in when we lost our parents — but I am not.

"When did you find out?" she asks, disappointed.

I stare at her, trying my hardest to choose the right words. The only thing I know is that Miguel is Valentina's father, but everything else is mere speculation at this point. She doesn't know that, though.

"Once Valentina told me who he is, it wasn't hard to put the pieces together. The only way that information could have been kept from me is if you specifically asked Silas not to disclose it to me. After that, it was easy to figure out the rest. Why did you do it?"

She looks down at her plate and sighs. "I'm surprised Val told you about him. It's a sore subject for her, and I didn't think she'd ever open up about it. She acts like he's dead to her, after all." Grandma pushes a strand of her hair behind her ear, and my eyes zero in on the way her hand trembles. Odd. I don't think I've ever seen her nervous before.

"What would you have had me do, Luca?" she asks, crestfallen. "When I saw her name on the list of applicants, I recognized her immediately. I still remember accompanying your parents to visit Val's parents when she was born, you know? Your father and Miguel went to college together, and when Miguel left home, your father was one of the few people who supported him. I remember how much he was rooting for them, and how upset he was when Miguel left his family. Your father's friendship with Miguel ended the day he walked away from Val. I know that if they'd still been around, your parents would have done all they could for Val. She would've been too young to remember, but they adored her when she was little."

She takes a sip of her tea and falls silent for a moment, giving me a moment to digest the news. Grandma rarely mentions my parents, and this is a story I've never heard before. Somehow, I can imagine my father breaking ties with Miguel over the way he left Valentina, and the thought

makes me oddly proud. I wonder what they'd think if they knew I ended up marrying her.

"Her resume looked empty, and I was concerned she wouldn't be able to find a job. I figured it wouldn't hurt to give her a chance. I'm glad I did, because she turned out to be the best hiring decision I ever made. She excelled at her job and still does." Grandma pauses and shakes her head. "But if she had known that she got her job in part because of the friendship between your fathers, she would have quit. She wants nothing to do with him, and unfortunately, he wants to keep her hidden, too. Behind the scenes, he was thwarting her job search. He never would have allowed her to get a high-profile job, because he doesn't want anyone to find out about the family he abandoned. The only time he'd ever admit that she's his daughter is if he stands to gain something from it."

She looks into my eyes, her gaze pleading. "And you? If you had known that I truly did hire her with ulterior motives, and that she truly did get her job through nepotism, would you ever have let her live it down? You hated her when I first hired her and went out of your way to make her life difficult. What would have happened if you'd had that information? You'd have used it against her, wouldn't you?"

I sit back as guilt eats at me. For years, I taunted her, telling her that she must have used underhanded means to get her job, and for years, she worked herself to the bone just to prove me wrong. If she were to find out about this, everything she's worked so hard for would feel tainted.

"My wife can never find out," I say, my voice terse.

Grandma smiles. "I haven't breathed a word about it for years, Luca. Why would I start now?"

I stare at her for a moment, seeing her through fresh eyes. "Why did you place her by my side?"

She chuckles and tilts her head, a knowing smile on her lips. "Because I knew that she would thrive by your side. I'm not unaware of the harsh words you continued to throw at her, but I'm also aware of how much effort you put into training her, and the countless chances you gave her. You held onto her tightly even when she made mistakes you'd never forgive others for. Throughout it all, you may have shouted at her and made her feel horrible with your words, but you stood by her and fixed every single one of her errors. Several times, you've gone so far as to sweep a few of them under the carpet, thinking I wouldn't find out that some of the company's

losses were a direct result of Val's mistakes. That is why, Luca. Because your words have always been inconsistent with your actions, and I knew that despite your reluctance, you would give her the chance she deserved. I took a chance on her, on you, and on what you could be together."

I frown at her, my thoughts suddenly wandering in a direction I never thought they'd go to. Surely, she didn't push Valentina toward me thinking we'd end up falling in love? I shake the thought off and sigh. Of course not. If she wanted us together, she'd simply have made me marry her in the first place, wouldn't she?

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Chapter Forty-Four

VALENTINA

"Are you sure you want to join me?" I ask for the tenth time, part of me hoping he'll change his mind. We're meant to stay at Abuela's house today, but I'm nervous about bringing him home with me. I've been putting it off for months, but I'm running out of excuses now. If I stay away any longer, I'll just hurt Abuela.

It's hard enough to put on an act in front of my mother, but now that he knows about my father, I'm even more worried. On top of that, Luca has been acting odd lately, and I don't know what to make of it. He's been kinder, but also quieter and much more distant. I was certain he'd have questions about my father, but he hasn't said a thing about it, and I don't understand why.

“I can just go by myself. We wouldn’t be in breach of the rules. I’d just be away for one night.”

I’m not necessarily ashamed of my past, but I’m scared to show him a part of me that’s in direct contrast to the picture I painted for him. In just one aspect of my life, I want to be confident and well-respected. When I’m with Luca, at work, I get to be the version of myself I always wanted to be. I’m scared that he wouldn’t look at me the same anymore if he got to know the real me.

With each month of marriage that passes by, I become more insecure and scared. The woman he thought he married and the one I am deep inside aren’t the same, and I’m terrified he’ll abandon me when he finally realizes it. At the same time, a small part of me hopes that even if he does find out, he’ll want me the same. It’s a jarring feeling, to so desperately want something I swore to myself I’d never desire.

Luca leads me to the car silently. “I know your mother is still worried about you,” he says eventually, his voice soft. “She’s only barely started speaking to you again. What would she think if you show up without me?”

He’s right, of course. Yet I can’t help but wonder what would be worse, going home without him or him witnessing what my family is truly like. It’s one thing to hear degrading comments about my dad, but it’s even worse now that he knows who my father is.

I’m so lost in thought that I barely even realize it when we pull up in front of the house. It isn’t until Luca opens the car door on my side that I snap out of it. He offers me his hand, and I carefully place mine in his, my gaze pausing on my wedding ring.

Three diamonds. One for each year we spend together. I’m increasingly growing concerned about the impact this marriage will have on me. When this is all over, will I walk away without any damage, or will he leave his mark on me?

“Val,” Mom says when we walk in, her expression stony. She doesn’t look happy to see us, but she doesn’t look as annoyed as I expected either. “Luca.” Her voice wavers when she says his name. It’s clear that it’s hard for her to see him as something other than my boss.

“Go on. Put your stuff away. I’ll make some tea. Abuela is sleeping, so be quiet.”

I nod and lead Luca up the stairs, nerves thrumming down my spine. “Valentina,” he says. “Stop being so nervous. You’ve been at my

grandmother's house countless times. This is no different."

I glance back at him and shake my head. No. It's not the same at all. He grew up in pure luxury, surrounded by siblings who adore him. My life is the polar opposite of his in every way, and somehow, I'm scared he'll realize how incompatible we are. I shouldn't care, because I know none of this is real, but I *do* care.

Luca chuckles when we walk into my old bedroom, fascination lighting up his expression. He looks at all the yellow post-it notes on my walls and traces over them with the tips of fingers, a wicked smile on his lips. "So your love for these started young, huh?"

I move to stand next to him and stare at the motivational quotes littering my walls. All my life, I was convinced that I could escape my circumstances if I just kept hoping, so that's exactly what I did. Despite the odds, I kept fighting and hoping for a better life. All of these little notes were an attempt to keep myself going when I was ready to give up.

"What is this?" he asks, pointing toward a picture of a large tree surrounded by a lake that perfectly mirrors the sky. It's the only photo I've got on my wall, and it sticks out amongst my countless sticky notes.

I smile as I stare at it. "I'm not even sure where that is, you know?" I admit. "I saw it online one day, and it just inspired me endlessly. You probably think it's silly, but I feel like I'm kind of like that tree. Looking at it makes me feel like I, too, can thrive in unfavorable circumstances, and that even if I'm all alone, I can be strong. It grew surrounded by water, no other trees around it, yet it's a sight to behold, unwavering and unapologetic. Surrounded by the elements, I'm sure it bends at times, but it never breaks. Someday I want to find it. I have a feeling that the day I do will be one I'll never forget."

I look away from the image to find Luca staring at me, his gaze filled with something that makes my heart flutter. "And this?" he asks, pointing toward one of my sticky notes. "*Aut viam inveniam aut faciam,*" he murmurs. "What does that mean? You've written it on several notes, and you've got it stuck to your desk at the office, too."

I raise my brows, surprised he noticed that. "It roughly translates to *I'll either find a way or create one*. It's my favorite quote, and it's the one that kept me going throughout the years."

He leans against the only empty wall in my room and pulls me closer, his touch gentle as he brushes my hair out of my face. "And did you? Did

you find a way?”

I look into his eyes, my heart pounding loudly. Sometimes he looks at me a certain way, and it makes everything fade away, until all I can see is him. “I’m not sure yet,” I whisper.

Luca cups my face, his touch tender. “What is it going to take for you to be sure?” he asks, and all of a sudden, I’m no longer sure what we’re talking about. He’s been acting this way recently, his gaze turns pensive, as though he misses me when I’m right next to him.

Luca leans in slowly, his lips brushing over mine once, twice, before he captures them fully. He groans as he pulls me closer and turns us around, until he’s got me pressed against the wall, his hand wrapped in my hair. I could lose myself in his kisses, in this thing between us. He makes me want to do the one thing I told myself I never would again.

His hands dip lower, and he lifts me into his arms. My legs instinctively wrap around his hips, and just feeling how hard he is for me sends a rush of desire through me. There’s something so empowering about knowing that he always wants me this badly.

“Valentina,” he groans against my lips, his mouth trailing down to my neck. His touch is desperate, and I revel in it. I’ve missed him more than I care to admit. The last couple of days have been odd, the distance between us seemingly insurmountable, but it all disappears when he touches me this way.

I arch my back, needing more. “We shouldn’t be doing this,” I whisper. “What if my mother comes up to find us?”

He chuckles as his teeth graze over my neck. “Then I guess we’d better be quick.”

Luca’s palm slides down my stomach and into the skirt I’m wearing, until he’s got his thumb pressed against my lace underwear. He groans when he realizes that I’m wet, and his forehead drops to mine. “This is one of the things I love most about you,” he whispers. “The way your pussy is always ready for me.”

My cheeks flush when he roughly pushes my underwear aside. “I need you, baby. Right fucking now.”

I nod and unbutton his jeans frantically, my thoughts clouded by desire. The way he looks at me when my hands wrap around his cock will never get old. He looks like he’s at my mercy, like his entire world revolves around me.

Luca’s eyes are on mine as I guide him into me, and the pure desire he shows me only heightens my own need. “Such a good pussy,” he groans as he thrusts into me fully.

I moan, and he shakes his head, his hand wrapping over my lips to silence me. “No, baby,” he whispers. “Quiet.” He fucks me like that, pushed up against my bedroom wall, one hand over my mouth and the other underneath me, holding me up.

“More,” I beg, and he uncovers my mouth, both of his hands moving to my hips instead. He holds my hips tightly and turns us around, so he’s leaning against the wall. Rather than thrusting into me, he moves me up and down his cock, his movements rough. He handles me with such ease that it’s like I don’t weigh a thing.

“Like this?” he asks, holding me at a slight angle.

I gasp and suppress a moan. *“L-Luca,”* I whisper. He knows exactly what he’s doing to me when he takes me at that angle, and the way he smirks tells me he’s loving every second of watching me unravel. “I can’t,” I groan. “It’s too much.” It feels too deep, and the way he’s moving inside me is driving me insane. With every thrust, he’s pushing up against me the way I like it, and he knows it.

“You can,” he promises me. “You can take it, baby.”

He tightens his grip on me and bites down on his lip as he increases the pace. I can’t handle it when he looks at me that way. “I’m… I can’t…”

“Then come for me, wife. Treat me to my favorite sight, Valentina.” He turns us around and pushes me against the wall harshly, his cock slamming all the way into me right as my muscles contract around him. His hand wraps around my lips, drowning out my moans as he takes me over the edge.

“Fuck,” he groans, his forehead dropping to mine, his breathing ragged. “I’ll never get enough of you. I’ll still want you this way when we’re gray and old.”

My eyes widen, and he chuckles as he replaces his hand with his lips, kissing me slowly. “I can’t get enough of you either,” I admit, my heart racing. Could he… could he really be thinking of a future with me outside of our contract? I haven’t even allowed myself to consider it.

“Val?” The sound of my mother’s voice near my door has me pushing against Luca roughly, my eyes wide with panic. He lowers me to the floor instantly and my hands run down my body in a rush, making sure

everything is covered and neat. Luca's movements are equally quick, and it only takes him a second to pull up his jeans and take several steps away from me, an innocent expression on his face by the time my mother walks in.

She frowns and glances between us, her brows raised. I'm standing further away from Luca than is natural, and I have no doubt my cheeks are crimson. There's no doubt that we look suspicious, and all of a sudden, I feel like a naughty teenager.

"Come downstairs," she says, her voice clipped. "Abuela is awake now. She wants to see you."

I nod, and she walks out, clearly displeased with us. "You don't think she realized, right?" I ask, thoroughly embarrassed. I needed this moment with him, but it couldn't have come at a worse time.

Luca laughs and shakes his head, his eyes twinkling. He walks toward me with a look in his eyes that has my heart racing all over again, and I take a step back.

"Oh, she knows," he says, his arm wrapping around my waist. "But we're married, baby. It's fine. Let's go greet your grandma before I truly get thrown out of this house." He kisses me, his touch lingering for a moment before he pulls back, his forehead pressed against mine. I want us to be like this all the time. I'm not sure what caused the recent distance between us, but I'll do anything to erase it.

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Chapter Forty-Five

VALENTINA

I sneak a look at Luca as Abuela tells him how naughty I was as a child, the feeling bittersweet.

“Look at this,” she says, showing him an old photo album. “She loved that doll so much that she’d cry if you tried to take it from her. I think she loved that doll more than she loved me.”

Abuela seems to be doing well, and I owe it all to him. He ensured that she has round the clock care, and he even had a team come in to assess whether anything in the house could be dangerous to her. It looks like they cleared out a lot and created a lot more space, without taking away anything Abuela loves. They ensured that her home remained comfortable and recognizable for her, and I couldn’t be more grateful for it.

“Val,” my mother murmurs as she sits down next to me on the sofa, her eyes on Luca. He’s lost in conversation with Abuela, treating her with endless patience and kindness. I wasn’t sure what to expect, but I shouldn’t have worried. He’s treating my family the way he treats his own, and he doesn’t look uncomfortable at all. “Tell me,” Mom says, her voice soft. “Are you happy?”

I tear my eyes off Luca to look at her, surprised she’d ask me that. I don’t recall the last time she was even remotely concerned about my happiness. Perhaps this is the kind of question a daughter should expect from her mother, but that isn’t the case for me. I glance back at Luca for a moment, the edges of my lips turning up. “Yeah,” I whisper. “I’m very happy.”

She follows my gaze and sighs. “I hope I was wrong,” she says, her voice so soft I nearly miss it.

I instinctively tense, worried she’ll start talking about my dad and the way he wronged her. I don’t want Luca to hear, especially now that he knows who my father is. Maybe it’s silly, but I want to maintain the façade I crafted. It isn’t often that we’re having a pleasant evening together like this, and for just tonight, I want to delude myself into believing that I’m just a girl, happily married and surrounded by her loving family.

“Just be careful,” she adds. “End of the day, all men are the same. They only want one thing. Things might be good and fun now, but the shine will wear off. Your father was the same. I’m very worried about you, Val. I never wanted you to marry him. Marriage should be between two equals, after all. I don’t want you to get hurt.”

I let my eyes fall closed for a moment. “Please don’t,” I whisper. “Not tonight, Mom.”

She frowns, and I brace myself for the inevitable deluge of complaints. In my mother’s opinion, I should be more grateful to have her, more mindful of everything she went through. Most of the time, I am, but I don’t have it in me tonight.

Mom opens her mouth, but before she can utter a word, I notice Luca flinching from my peripheral vision. Abuela smacks his arm hard, and I turn toward them, shocked.

She looks at him in confusion, her expression portraying genuine concern and fear. “Who are you?” she asks, her eyes filled with panic. “Y-you… w-why are you in my house? I have no valuables,” she tells Luca.

She jumps up and takes a step back, nearly tripping when she bumps into the coffee table. It only takes her nurse a second to reach her, her movements swift but gentle.

“Abuelita,” I say as I rise to my feet, my tone calming. “He’s my husband, Abuelita. It’s okay.”

She turns toward me, but there’s no recognition in her eyes. My heart sinks when she raises her arm and tries to hit me. I step back, shocked.

My grandmother has always been my world and having her look at me without an ounce of recognition kills me. It hurts to watch her sanity devolve like that when she’s always been one of the smartest and most courageous people I know.

“Leave,” Mom says, her tone urgent. “Go to your room. She’ll just get more and more agitated if there are too many people around her. It’s okay, Val. Everything will be okay, but you need to go.”

Luca grabs my hand and guides me out of the living room as Abuela’s shouting intensifies. It’s clear that she doesn’t understand why there’s a nurse in our living room, and her distraught expression haunts me all the way up.

Luca sits me down on my bed and kneels in front of me, his hands covering mine. “Valentina,” he whispers, his voice pained. “Are you okay?”

My eyes drop to his wedding ring, and a tear runs down my cheek. Luca cups my face and swipes at my tears with his thumbs, his gaze filled with concern. “Don’t cry, baby,” he murmurs. “Please, my love. I promise you that our medical staff is doing everything in their power to give your grandmother the support she needs.”

I nod, but my tears only fall harder. Luca sits down next to me and pulls me into his embrace, my heart breaking in so many different ways. He doesn’t say a word. All he does is pull me into bed with him until I’m lying half on top of him, my face buried against his neck. He holds me tightly as I fall apart, his touch soothing.

“I… I wish you could’ve met her sooner. My abuela means the world to me. If not for her, I wouldn’t be the person I am today. She has always been a shining light, my beacon when the world was engulfed in darkness. You would’ve loved her. She’s so funny, and so insightful, and she’s just the best cook.”

He presses a kiss on top of my head and nods. “I know, my love,” he murmurs. “Remember when I tried to replicate your grandmother’s

taquitos? It was a disaster, but someday, I'm going to ask her to teach me. And you're right, she really is funny. Remember how she taunted you when we first told them about us and called me the devil?"

He cups my cheek and smiles. "I know it hurts, baby, but these episodes, that's not her. She's just confused and scared, and it's only natural to react that way. I won't ever think badly of her for it, so don't worry about how I perceive her. How could she be anything but lovely when she played such a big role in raising you?"

My eyes fill with tears all over again, but for a different reason this time. "Luca," I whisper. "To be honest, I was really scared to bring you home with me. I didn't want you to see how imperfect my family is. You've always seen me as such a highly competent partner, but when I'm at home… I just… I lose sight of who I've grown into. I didn't want you to witness that and think less of me."

He turns us over so we're both on our side, the two of us facing each other. "I figured as much. You've been tense ever since we got here, and you've barely spoken a word. You're withdrawn and nervous, and that isn't like you." He tucks my hair behind my ear and sighs. "There is nothing you could do or say that will make me want you any less. You're my wife, Valentina, for better or for worse. I don't just want the best parts of you, baby. I want all of you."

I look into his eyes, my heart bleeding. This is why I'm so scared lately — because with each passing day, he steals away more of me than I'm willing to give.

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Chapter Forty-Six

LUCA

I lean back in my desk chair and check my pocket watch, the worn image of my mother staring back at me. I can't help but wonder if my parents would be proud of me. I'm not far off from making the vision my father had come true, but would they be proud of the person I became and the choices I made? Would they applaud me or berate me for what I'm about to do?

My office door opens, and I snap my watch closed. Miguel Garcia walks in, a smug smile on his face. I can see it now, the resemblance. Valentina has his eyes — it's the only good thing he seems to have given her. How could he have looked into those beautiful hazel eyes of hers and walked away? How could he have abandoned her?

I still remember how impoverished she looked when she first started working for me. She'll never know, but she's the reason our entire company now gets free catered lunch in the cafeteria. It's something I implemented when I realized she was eating cup noodles every single day, despite the salary I paid her. It didn't take me long to find out that all her money went toward her family's care and upkeep.

There's no way he couldn't have known. If my grandmother is correct, and he was actively trying to prevent her from getting a high-profile job, he would have known she had to drop out of college. He would've known what situation her family was in, and how much had fallen onto her dainty shoulders. He knew, and he once again turned his back on her.

"I knew you'd call me eventually," he says as he holds his hand out for me to shake.

I stare at in disgust and tip my head toward the seat opposite my desk. "Sit."

He frowns for a moment before pulling his hand away and doing as I asked. I've got approximately thirty minutes before Valentina's meeting with *Ben* and Stephen ends, and I want this pile of garbage out of here before she's forced to lay her pretty eyes on him. He is one of the reasons she was scared to bring me home, why she's hiding part of herself from me.

"I've been looking to invest in your fund for months now, but your secretary failed to convey my messages. After what you told me last time, I didn't think I'd hear from you. I suppose you've realized how incompetent she is, and how much money you're leaving on the table because of her. It's hard to find good staff these days, so I won't hold it against you in the slightest. You did, after all, reach out personally."

How? How could a man like him have fathered someone like Valentina? Perhaps not having him in her life is a blessing, and not the curse she thinks it to be. Nevertheless, there's no forgiveness for the pain he caused her. There is only retribution.

"I invited you here to inform you that I'm formally withdrawing the insurance policies every single Windsor company has with ReInsure as soon as our term is up. We will not be renewing. All of the Kingston companies are following suit, and so is Silas Sinclair's firm. If I have it my way, the rest of my network will follow my lead. All in all, I expect the loss to be a few hundred million for you."

Until now, he's handled every single type of insurance for us, ranging from litigation insurance to the health insurance we provide to all of our employees. His company is the industry standard for insurance, but it won't be for much longer. I can't touch the Garcia family as a whole — they're simply too powerful. But this? This I can do. Miguel and Reinsure aren't that hard to destroy. I'll ruin him, and not even the head of the Garcia family, Hugo Garcia, will be able to save him. With a bit of luck, Hugo won't even care about his second cousin. The loss of such a profitable company will draw his attention, but I'm willing to face any consequences that come from it.

"Ares will issue a formal statement through a press conference, and every single media firm we own will cover the news. We'll ensure *everyone* hears about it. How many clients do you think you'll lose? How many companies will assume that we must know something they don't?"

The panic in his eyes brings me joy, but it isn't enough. I want him to suffer the way he made my wife suffer. I'll take away everything he left her for, right down to the same fucking building he refused her entry to.

"Why would you do that?" he asks, his voice trembling. "Is there something we've done? Are the prices of our policies too high? We can always renegotiate, Luca. Let's talk about this, and allow me to make you an offer you can't refuse. I've been meaning to re-invest the insurance funds, and it's Windsor Finance I chose. It would be a massive investment."

I chuckle and run a hand through my hair. "Do I look like someone who lacks money?" I pause and take in the utter desperation in his eyes. He's not stupid. He knows this could easily bankrupt his company, and his reputation will never recover.

"Please," he says, the word clearly hard for him to say. "Tell me what's going on. I can fix this, if you tell me what it is you're displeased with."

I smile at him and cross my arms. "Very well. I'll reconsider if you go down on your hands and knees in front of Valentina and *beg* her to forgive you for the pain you've caused her. If you can make her forgive you and acknowledge her not only as your daughter, but as your heir, I'll keep my hands off you."

He rises to his feet in such a rush that his chair clatters to the floor. I glance past him and sigh, irritated. Valentina took a lot of care choosing those chairs. If he damaged them, I'm sure that would annoy her. Perhaps I shouldn't have offered him leniency after all.

“I don’t know what that little wench told you, but she takes after her mother. She’s a nagging little thing, and no doubt, she made you pity her with some bullshit sob story. Did she seduce you the way her mother seduced me? Take it from me, Luca. You’ll regret this. I’ve been in your shoes, and I understand what it’s like to be blinded by passion. She isn’t worth destroying a solid business relationship. What do you think people will say when they hear you cut ties with me over a woman? They’ll ridicule you.”

I smile and lean forward, my elbow on my desk and my fist pressed to my chin. “No, they won’t. They’ll applaud me for doing what Windsors always do: putting family first. I strongly advise you to beg my wife for forgiveness. If you don’t do it by the end of the day, I’ll take every single thing that you left her for, and I’ll drive it into the fucking ground. I’ll make you regret the day you left her waiting for you at school, filled with faith that you’d be there. You broke her heart in irreparable ways, and I won’t stop until you feel the way she once did: despaired and abandoned. There will always be a price to pay for bringing tears to my wife’s eyes, Miguel. I’ll make you pay for every single one of them if it’s the last fucking thing I do.”

“*Wife*?” he repeats, his face blanching.

My office door opens, and Valentina walks in. She pauses midway, her eyes landing on Miguel. *Fuck.* It fucking kills me to see her make that hurt expression, even if it’s only for a split-second before she schools her features. How did I miss that last time? Is that how she looked at him then too?

“Beg,” I murmur, my voice low. “Or get the fuck out of my office before I have security drag you out.”

He glances at me, his gaze filled with hatred that only amuses me. Then he turns and walks out, brushing past Valentina as though she’s nothing to him. I see the way she flinches, and I’m going to make sure he regrets acting this way. One way or another, I’m going to bring him to his knees in front of my wife.

“What was he doing here?” she asks, her gaze filled with accusations. “You agreed to let him invest?” She looks away, as though she can’t bear to face me. I can see it in her demeanor. She thinks I betrayed her the way he did. It makes sense now, the way she keeps everyone at a distance, as

though she believes it'll hurt less if she pushes people away before they have a chance to leave her.

"Come here." I hold my hand out for her, and she grits her teeth. "Please, baby."

Some of the tension flows out of her body as she walks toward me, a spark of hope in her gaze, as though she wishes I'll prove her wrong. She's giving me a chance.

Valentina places her hand in mine, and I bring our joined hands to my lips. "Tell me, my wife. Do you want me to take everything from him and give it to you? Do you want his company for yourself, or should I destroy it? If you want it, I'll acquire it for you after I sink his share price. We can turn it into Windsor Insurance."

She stares at me wide-eyed. "W-what… what are you… Luca, you can't. H-he is… my father is ruthless. Please don't—"

I've never seen her so rattled. She's always overconfident, even in situations she shouldn't be, yet here she is, insecure and worried, because of that fucker. I cup her face and smile at her. "Did you forget who you married? I once promised you I'd put every single one of my resources at your disposal, so use me. You don't have to be the bigger person anymore, Valentina. That's only for people without the power to make a difference. You're a *Windsor* now. You're *my wife*. Anything you want, baby. Just tell me, and I'll make it yours."

She smiles at me then, genuinely, some of her unease fading away. "You really would, wouldn't you?"

I nod. "I'd do anything for you, Valentina."

"Why?" she whispers, her gaze once more reflecting pain.

Does she really not know why? I run a hand through my hair and sigh. "Valentina, you make me wish it were possible to pluck a star from the sky, just so I could make you smile. You make me do things I've never done before. Surely you know that? Maybe you truly have driven me insane, at last. You must have, because how else would you explain the fact that I'd start a war for you?"

In many ways, the words I just spoke to Miguel truly will start a war. The media coverage will be a bloodbath, and his company is about to become the biggest casualty. I can't bring myself to regret it though. Valentina deserves this much. She might not ask for it, but she deserves revenge. No matter the cost.

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Chapter Forty-Seven

LUCA

My heart skips a beat when my wife walks out of the dressing room, a long red gown highlighting every delicious curve. “We should stay home,” I murmur.

Valentina chuckles, and my heart skips a beat. She hasn’t smiled that way in a while. Witnessing her grandmother have an episode took its toll on her, and seeing her father in my office just made things worse. I suspect that Ben constantly being around her at work doesn’t help either. Everywhere she turns, there are reminders of the past, and no matter how hard I try, I can’t eliminate them all.

Hopefully, she’ll be able to relax a little tonight. I know we’re technically attending this charity event for work, but I’m definitely sneaking in a dance or two with her.

“What’s wrong?” she asks, twirling around slowly. “Weren’t you the one who picked this dress? Raven told me you called her and kept grumbling about how you wanted me wearing red for *you* this time. Don’t tell me you’re still mad about Theo? How can you be so petty, Luca?”

Heat rushes to my cheeks as I mentally curse my sister-in-law. Damn Raven. I should’ve kept my mouth shut around her. Of course she went and tattled to my wife straight away. “Stay right there,” I tell her when she walks toward me. “Let me take a photo for your grandmother.” Abuela has been calling me every so often ever since Valentina and I stayed the night at her house. In part, I think, because she’s trying to make me feel accepted. I think she feels bad for the way she hit me, and I’m not sure how to convince her that it’s completely fine. It’s easy to see why Valentina loves her so much.

My wife’s eyes widen a fraction, and she smiles broadly as she poses for me. For a moment, I just stare at her, frozen in place.

“Luca?”

I snap out of it and take a couple of photos, my heart racing. She’s so beautiful, it’s unreal. When she smiles at me that way, I become utterly useless. I truly think she’s slowly driving me insane.

“Let’s go, Luca. We’ll be late.”

I quickly set the new photo of her as my phone’s background and send it to Abuela, feeling oddly pleased with myself. Abuela and I have been getting on great lately, and Valentina doesn’t know it, but I now know all kinds of embarrassing childhood stories. Her calls have become something I look forward to. Sometimes it’s simply to ask me if Valentina and I have eaten yet, and other times it’s to tell me stories of the past. Valentina’s mother won’t warm up to me, but Abuela definitely has.

“You really look far too beautiful,” I grumble as we walk into the venue the charity ball is being held in. With each passing day, it becomes harder to keep this marriage hidden. I want everyone to know that she’s mine, that touching her will invoke my wrath.

She smiles at me, her eyes twinkling. “Thank you, husband.”

Damn it. That’s fucking foul play, and she knows it. “You’d better remember,” I murmur.

“Remember what?”

“That I’m your husband.”

She chuckles and straightens out the lapels of my tux. I bite back a smile when I see the diamonds in her wedding ring glittering in the light. “How could I ever forget?” she asks me.

“Fuck,” I growl. “You’re such a good girl, baby.” Looks like she didn’t take her wedding ring off after I put it on her this morning, and the sight of it on her finger brings me such intense fucking pleasure. “Let’s wrap this up quickly so we can go home. You deserve a reward for wearing your ring to an event like this one.”

Her gaze darkens, and she looks away. “I’ll hold you to it,” she murmurs, her voice low.

Fucking hell. Should I just take my wife home right now and bribe the Kennedys?

“Oh, there they are!” Valentina says, her hand wrapping around mine. She pulls me along before abruptly letting go, her cheeks heating when she realizes she was holding my hand. I love how she’s slipping up lately. It’s clear she’s warming to the thought of us being a couple out in the open. Just a little longer. If I can hold on a little longer, I’ll be able to convince her to publicize our marriage. I can’t rush anything when it comes to her.

“Luca?” Alec says, surprised. “I haven’t seen you in a while. How are you?”

We shake hands, and Alec’s wife, Elena, hugs me tightly, much to her husband’s chagrin. He pulls her into him and wraps his hand around her waist possessively, making me chuckle. I always thought that he was overly obsessed with his wife, but I finally get it.

“Alec, Elena, you must have already met my wi—” I pause and catch myself in time. “My… wildly intelligent Executive Secretary,” I end up saying, my expression stony. What the fuck did I just say?

Valentina looks at me, her expression flustered but surprisingly, not angry. Just a few weeks ago, she’d have been furious over a near slip-up like that. Maybe she really is warming to the idea of truly being my wife.

I stand back as she charms Alec with her knowledge and professionalism. When she’s like that, I can’t take my eyes off her. I love every version of her, but this one is my favorite. Valentina on a mission, filled with passion and confidence, is a sight to behold. It took her weeks to put together a proposal for Alec, and I have no doubt he won’t be able to deny her. When my wife wants something, she never fails. Truthfully, she didn’t need to try so hard. I’m not at liberty to disclose it to her, but I know

which client Ben brought in. Even if Alec says no, Valentina still won't struggle to beat Ben. Anyone she would bring in will be better than what that jackass can accomplish.

"You're in love with her," Elena says as she moves to stand by my side, a few steps away from Alec and Valentina.

I turn toward her, surprised. "I… I'm sorry, what?"

She chuckles and turns back toward Valentina. "You nearly called her your wife, didn't you?"

Damn. I was hoping she missed that.

"You look at her the way my husband looks at me," she says, a smile on her face. "Let me tell you a secret, Luca. When Alec and I first got married, it was a marriage of convenience that no one knew about. It was meant to be a simple deal, and love was never part of the plan."

I turn toward her, wide-eyed. "*What*?"

She chuckles at my obvious disbelief. "You two are probably fooling everyone, but you can't fool Alec and me. Not when we've been in your exact situation."

Alec and Elena are so insanely in love with each other that it seems impossible for their marriage to have been one of convenience.

"I'll tell you another secret." I glance at her, wary. I dislike how quickly she figured us out. "Alec and I nearly got divorced because he refused to admit that he loved me. Don't let that happen to you. If you love her, you need to let her know, and you need to treat her right. Alec ended up suffering and groveling for months in an effort to save our marriage. Don't let it get that far, Luca."

I turn back toward my wife and sigh. "It isn't me," I tell her. "I'm not the problem. It's her. She doesn't love me, and she has no interest in turning this into anything more than it is. You have no idea how many tricks I had to play to even get her to marry me."

Elena looks into my eyes, her gaze searching. "Have you ever told her that you love her, and that your marriage is no longer the deal it started off as? How do you know that she isn't just adhering to the boundaries you mutually agreed on because she doesn't know you want her to overstep?"

I stare at her wide-eyed, but she merely smiles at me knowingly before turning away and walking toward Valentina. "We'll invest," she says, her arm wrapping around my wife. "Windsor Finance has been on our radar for a while now, and I've heard enough to be convinced."

Valentina looks at me with such joy in her eyes that I can’t help but chuckle. Aw, fuck. I’m fucking done for. Elena Kennedy is right. I’m head over heels for my wife.

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Chapter Forty-Eight

VALENTINA

I sit in bed with my laptop and scroll through the news articles covering the rapid demise of my father's company. Luca's actions seem to have prompted a deluge of investigations. He's being ripped apart from all angles. Even the IRS got involved. It looks like my husband is leaving no stone unturned, and it's oddly heartwarming. No one has ever stood up for me in that way. I've never truly had someone on my side, not until Luca.

"What is it that put that expression on your face?"

I gasp and click away my browser as Luca walks out of the bathroom in nothing but a pair of boxers. His gaze roams over my face curiously, and I shake my head. "Oh, it's nothing." I bite down on my lip as I randomly click open a document. "I was just looking at our next strategic

acquisitions. We're not far removed from making your father's vision come true, you know? We've accomplished so much already."

"Is that really what you were looking at?" he murmurs as he gets into bed next to me. "So you weren't following the news about ReInsure?"

I narrow my eyes at him, and he chuckles. "It's annoying how well you know me, Luca."

"Is it?" he asks as he lies down on his side, his head propped up on his elbow. "I love being the person that knows you best, baby. I love figuring out what every single one of your expressions means."

My heart skips a beat, and I can't help but look away. Sometimes I wonder if he does it on purpose. It's almost like he loves watching me get all flustered. "Is it fun, making me blush?"

"Yeah," he whispers. "It's my favorite hobby."

I bite down on my lip and shake my head, my heart racing. I love being the person who knows him best, too. I never thought this was what marriage would be like. It's nowhere near as bad as I was expecting. Time flies when we're together, to the point that he makes me wish we hadn't set an end date at all. He makes me wish this was all real.

"Which companies were you considering, my darling workaholic wife?"

I turn my laptop to let him read my document, and the smile melts off his face. "What's wrong?" I ask, glancing back at the document. The companies I put on there were really well researched, and there shouldn't be any issues with them.

"It's nothing," Luca says, his tone harsh all of a sudden.

My gaze roams over his face, searching. "Tell me the truth," I murmur, my heart racing in a different way than before. Something about his expression makes me nervous in the worst way.

He looks up at me and locks his jaws. "That one," he says, pointing to my screen. "Metric Payment Systems. It's owned by my ex's family."

An unfamiliar feeling settles in my stomach, and I look away. I still remember when he told me that he'd recognized the scars of betrayal in me, and that he left the woman who caused his scars in the past. The idea of Luca loving someone fills me with inexplicable rage.

Metric is a subsidiary of the White family's conglomerate. They're as prestigious as the Windsors, and no doubt, they'd make for a force to be reckoned with if they were to join hands. I bite down on my lip as I scroll through the information I compiled.

“Does it matter?” I ask, my voice soft. “You told me you left her in the past, so why does it matter that her family owns a company we want to acquire?”

He looks into my eyes, and this time, it looks like he’s the one looking for something. “She’s Metric’s CEO. If we acquire them, we’ll have to work with her directly. Is that something you’re comfortable with?”

Metric’s CEO? *Jessica White?* I lower my gaze, jealousy threatening to overwhelm me. Of course, Luca never would have dated someone simple. Of course, it had to be someone who’s beautiful, highly accomplished, smart, and rich. I should have known his ex would be someone I could never compare to.

“Why wouldn’t I be comfortable with it?” I ask, my voice tinged with anger. “I thought we agreed to keep our personal and professional lives separate? Acquiring them is a key component of the expansion plans you have.”

“I see,” he murmurs. “So, it won’t bother you if she tries to make a pass at me? Whenever I see her at events, she makes it clear that she wants to rekindle what we had. It’ll be no different if we work together. Are you okay with that?”

I stare at him for a moment, trying to figure out what he isn’t telling me. He wouldn’t have brought this up if he didn’t care about her at all anymore, right? “We may have agreed to be faithful to each other, but we specifically agreed that love wouldn’t factor into our marriage. It’s none of my concern whether you still have feelings for her or not, so long as you don’t cheat on me.”

Luca closes my laptop and pushes it aside. “Is that so?” he asks as he pulls me underneath him. He holds himself up on his forearms, his body pressed against mine. There’s anger in his eyes, but there’s something more too, something I can’t quite read.

He pushes a hand through my hair and tilts my head, exposing my neck before he lowers his lips to my skin. “You won’t care if I pretend that you’re Jessica as I kiss you right here?” He presses his lips just below my ear, and I gasp.

He moves his lips lower and pushes the straps of my pajama top off my shoulder, exposing my breasts. “You don’t care what I feel or think, right?” he asks. “So you won’t mind if I think of her as my tongue flicks over your nipple, just like this.”

My hand threads through his hair, and I grip tightly as he sucks down on my breast, his touch punishing. “If I keep my eyes closed, I can just about imagine it,” he murmurs, before moving to my other breast.

“*Stop*,” I plead, my voice breaking. “Stop it.”

He pushes himself up and looks into my eyes. “Why?” he asks. “This is what you want, right? You want boundaries between us, and you don’t care how far you push me away, so long as you don’t have to admit to yourself that you feel this thing between us too.”

I turn away from him, but he cups my cheek and makes me face him. “Look at me,” he tells me, his voice low. “Look into my eyes and tell me you don’t feel a thing for me. Tell me I’m the only one who’s falling, the only one who wants more. Can you look into my eyes and lie to me, Valentina? Can you lie to me the way you lie to yourself?”

“Luca,” I whisper.

“You can’t, can you?”

I shake my head, my throat closing up.

“Then stop pretending like you don’t give a fuck what I do. Stop acting like you don’t care, like this truly is just business. We both know it stopped being that long ago.”

He drops his forehead to mine and inhales shakily. “Can’t you just let us be happy together?” he asks, his voice breaking. “I wasn’t the one who broke your trust, so why is it that I’m paying the price for it?”

“Luca, I…” I murmur, unsure what to say.

“I love you, Valentina Windsor.” The torment on his face is in contrast with his words, and somehow, it only makes my own heart ache more, even as it floods with that very same love. “I fucking love you, and I’m tired of pretending I don’t.”

He pushes off me and sits up, his back toward me and his face buried in his hands. “I can’t do this,” he murmurs.

I rise to my knees and stare at him for a moment, fear immobilizing me. For the first time in years, I fear losing someone more than I fear getting hurt.

I move toward him without thinking and wrap my arms around his waist from behind, my forehead pressed against his shoulder. “Then let’s stop pretending,” I whisper. “Let’s both stop pretending, Luca, because I think… I think I love you, too.”

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Chapter Forty-Nine

LUCA

My head snaps up at her words, her voice barely above a whisper, as though she's scared merely saying that she loves me would jinx it. "Say that again," I demand as I turn back to face her.

She looks at me, her beautiful eyes filed with vulnerability as her long hair drapes over her body, covering up the red silk pajamas she's wearing. I suppose it's only right that she's wearing red tonight.

"I love you," she whispers.

I pull her closer, until I've got her in my lap. "Again."

"I love you, Luca. I know I shouldn't, and I know it isn't part of our deal, but I do."

"Fuck our deal," I tell her. "The only reason it exists is because there was no other way I could make you mine."

I bury my hand in her hair and hold her close, my heart hammering in my chest. I see the fear in her eyes, the vulnerability she shows me. Words won't reassure her, but time will.

I tilt her face gently and kiss her, slow and deep, as though I'm praying my touch will convey what words can't. "Luca," she whispers as I push her back onto our bed. Her hair spreads over our pillows, and she looks so fucking disarmed, so trusting, so very much *mine*. How do I ensure I never let her down?

I move on top of her and press a soft kiss just below her ear, making her shiver. "I love you," I whisper into her ear, before moving lower, to her collarbone. "I love every fucking inch of you, Mrs. Windsor."

Her fingers thread through my hair as I move lower, and the way she writhes underneath me drives me fucking mad. Tonight, I want to make her feel as crazy as she makes me. I want her desperate for me.

My wife moans when my lips brush over her nipple, and I can't help but smile against her skin before letting my tongue flick over her. She's sensitive, and I fucking love that about her. "My beautiful Ice Queen," I murmur, one hand making its way between her legs. "You're melting for me. Do you feel that? You're soaking my fingers."

She blushes so fucking beautifully when I trap her nipple between my teeth, teasing her as I slip two fingers into her. I'm taking it slow, knowing she wants more. "Luca," she groans. "Please."

I pull away from her and chuckle. "Please what?" The way my heart overflows with love and desire for this woman is surreal. This is all I've ever wanted.

"Please fuck me."

Goddamn. "I need you closer," I murmur as I move so I'm sitting up, my back against the headboard. "Come here." She climbs onto my lap and roughly pushes my boxer shorts down, freeing my cock. "If you want it, then take it. I'm yours for the taking, Valentina."

My wife smirks as she grabs my cock, her eyes on mine as she slowly lowers herself onto me. "Fuck," I groan. "I love your pussy so fucking much."

She giggles, and the sound makes my heart skip a beat. I place one hand on her waist and cup her face with the other, my thumb brushing over her lower lip as she starts to ride me.

"I love you," she whispers as she takes all of me.

Fuck. “You’re making every single one of my dreams come true,” I tell her as I grab her hips. “I can’t be gentle with you right now, Valentina.”

I hold on to her tightly as I thrust into her hard, and she moans. Her pussy has never felt better. I thread a hand through her hair and pull her closer, my heart racing. I want to lose myself in her tonight. Fuck, I’ve never wanted to be one with anyone but her. Valentina leans in and kisses me as she rotates her hips, her touch as desperate as mine is.

The way she pants my name against my lips in between kisses drives me wild. “I love you,” I whisper, over and over again, my heart fucking overflowing with emotions I can’t contain. I’ve had to keep it in for so long that the words refuse to remain buried tonight.

“I love you, too,” she tells me, her voice fucking heaven. Hearing her say that in that sexy tone, her pussy wrapped around me? Fuck. This is better than any dream I’ve ever had.

The way she’s riding me drives me fucking crazy, and I try my hardest to hold on to my sanity when her moans get a little louder. Watching her lose control for me is a fucking privilege.

“Luca,” she murmurs, pulling her lips off mine. Her hand threads through my hair, and she grips tightly, her face pressed against my neck.

I love her so fucking much. A soft chuckle escapes my lips as I grab her hips and fuck her harder, giving her what she wants. She’s right at the edge, and I love the way she just loses all her energy when she gets this close.

“Yes,” she moans. “*Please*.”

I bite down on my lip harshly when she sucks down on my neck, marking me. She’s never done that before, and the fucking rush she makes me feel nearly makes me come.

Her muscles contract around my cock, and I groan loudly, losing all control. “Fuck, Valentina,” I murmur. Hearing her moans in my ear, her lips pressed against my neck. Goddamn. I come deep inside her and hold her tightly, my head dropping to her shoulder. This woman fucking owns me.

She giggles as she tries to catch her breath, and I can’t help but join in and laugh alongside her. “I love you, Luca,” she says, and the pure joy in her voice makes it impossible to stop smiling.

I pull her into my arms and press a soft kiss to her forehead, my heart pounding wildly. I’ve never felt this happy before. I have no doubt that in fifty years, I’ll still remember this moment with her.

Valentina relaxes in my embrace, and I gently stroke her back as her breathing evens out. I've fallen asleep with her in my arms countless times now, but it's never felt like this before. I've never felt quite so *whole*, so complete.

My wife presses a kiss to my neck, her leg draped over me and her head on my chest. "That acquisition," I murmur eventually. "If you want to go ahead with it, you can. I don't give a shit about Jessica. There's nothing for you to worry about. I just wanted you to be aware of it, since I'm far from pleased to find *Ben* suddenly hovering around you. I hate the way he looks at you at the office, and the way he tries to find excuses to spend time with you. Your history with him makes me uncomfortable and restless, and I don't want you to experience any of those feelings."

I feel her gaze on me and gently caress her back, my touch soothing. I don't want anything standing between us anymore. I've got her so close, yet it isn't enough.

"I do want to acquire Metric, because it's the right move for us. When we got married, I promised you that I'd help you realize your father's vision, and this is essentially the final component of it." She hesitates. "But I want to know what happened. I don't want to face her and be caught unaware. If there's anything I need to know, I'd rather hear it from you."

I turn onto my side so I can face her properly. I'm reluctant to rehash a part of my past, but if I don't, she'll overthink things the way I did with her and Ben. "She and I are from the same social circle, so growing up, we'd run into each other often. I wouldn't necessarily call her a friend, but she was definitely an acquaintance of some sort."

Valentina stares at me so intently that I can't help but smile reassuringly. What does she expect me to say for her expression to be filled with such apprehension? It's clear that she's expecting the worst, somehow. "So when we went to college and ended up in the same classes, we became friends. Everything with her was easy and natural, and it wasn't until much later that I realized why. I kept running into her, and no matter what I needed, she was always there. Falling in love with her was effortless and natural, and knowing that our families would approve of us being together made it all the more easy. We dated throughout college, and I was close to bringing her home to my grandmother. I was going to ask for approval to marry her."

Valentina flinches and looks away, her gaze filling with sorrow. I cup her face gently and make her face me.

“A few days before I was supposed to tell my grandmother, I found out that she’d been cheating on me with multiple men throughout the years we were together. I still don’t know who it was, but I received an anonymous parcel with photos of her and other men. I confronted her about it, and she laughed in my face. She told me that I was idealistic and immature for thinking that we’d be faithful to each other for the rest of our lives. We argued, and she admitted that she only approached me because her family told her to. She chose her college and majors because of me, and everything that I thought was fate, was carefully orchestrated by her. She didn’t want me, she wanted to be a Windsor. I ended things and never looked back. It’s why I didn’t think I’d be opposed to an arranged marriage, you know? I thought a contractual relationship would suit me best. That way, I’d never have to wonder if any of it was real.”

She raises her hand and brushes the tips of her fingers over my temple, her gaze tormented. “How could she do that to you?” she asks, her voice breaking.

I grab her hand and entwine our fingers before lifting it to my lips. “If she hadn’t, we might not have ended up this way, baby. Ultimately, everything in life led me to you. You told me not to worry about Ben, and I’ve tried my best not to despite the way he keeps hovering around you… so grant me the same courtesy. If you choose to proceed with this acquisition, promise me you won’t worry about things that don’t matter. Promise me that you’ll remember that you’re the only one I love, the only one I’ll ever want.”

She nods. “I promise,” she whispers, her eyes on mine. She looks at me with a hint of disbelief, her smile so sweet that I wish I could engrave this image of her into my memories. “I love you, Luca. I’m not any less scared, but you’re worth the risk. If you end up breaking what’s left of my heart, I still won’t regret it.”

“I won’t ever hurt you,” I promise her. After everything we’ve been through, there’s no way I’ll let anything come between us ever again — not even her insecurities. For the rest of our lives, I’ll prove to her that her faith in me isn’t misplaced.

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Chapter Fifty

VALENTINA

I reject Ben's call for the 10th time tonight, annoyed he got his hands on my phone number in the first place. He's been trying to find excuses to speak to me outside of the meetings we unfortunately both must attend, and I've been doing my best to avoid him. Is this what it was like years ago? How could I have fallen for his incessant pestering?

I only need to tolerate him for a little longer. There are only a few days left before the board makes a decision, and once they do, we won't have to work together so closely anymore. Even if he stays at Windsor Finance, I won't necessarily have to see him.

Luca closes his laptop and places it on the coffee table, his jaws clenched. "How long has this been going on?" he asks me as he leans back against the sofa, his voice soft. He takes my laptop from me and closes that

too, his movements so carefully controlled that it gives away just how angry he is.

"I… you mean…"

"How long has that fucker been calling you? Your two months are nearly up. Have you been speaking to him all along?"

"Only about work," I reassure him.

Luca's eyes flash, and he pulls me onto his lap, my back against his chest. "Why?" he asks, his lips brushing over my neck. "Are you my only employee? Is there no one else he can turn to? You know it's just an excuse."

His teeth graze over my neck, and he bites down on my skin for a moment, before sucking harshly, marking me. "*Luca*," I moan, my heart racing. There's something irresistible about him whenever he acts this possessive. Everything I used to hate about him, I've come to love.

His hands roam over my body, and he pushes the straps of my pajama top off my shoulders, exposing my breasts.

"You know I only want you," I murmur, before tilting my head back. His lips find mine, and he kisses me slowly as one hand slips into my pajama bottoms. A soft growl escapes his lips as his middle finger brushes over my clit.

My phone starts to ring again, and he pulls his lips off mine. "Pick up. If I find out this call is about anything other than work, there'll be hell to pay."

Luca's finger moves down from my clit and slips into me just as I pick up the phone, and I bite down on my lip for a moment.

"Val?" Ben says, sounding a little drunk. "Where are you?"

Luca pushes another finger into me, and I gasp. "At home, of course. It's nearly ten in the evening. Where else would I be?"

"I need to see you," Ben says, but I can't focus on anything when Luca is slowly slipping two fingers in and out of me, his cock hardening underneath me rapidly.

His lips brush against my ear, and he bites down on my earlobe for a moment. "This doesn't sound like it's about work, baby," he whispers, his tone threatening. His free hand moves to my breast and he pinches my nipple as he pushes his fingers deeper into me.

"Why?" I ask Ben, my voice husky.

Luca pulls his fingers away, and I whimper. "Get on your knees," he whispers, repositioning me on the sofa so my ass is in the air. His hand

wraps around the back of my neck, and he presses my face into the sofa before placing my phone right next to me, on loudspeaker.

“I miss you so much, Val. Please, I just need to see you. Can’t you just give me ten minutes?”

Luca’s fingers wrap around my pajama bottoms, and he pulls them down to my knees, right along with my panties.

“No,” I say. “If this isn’t about work, I’m going to end this call. I’m busy, Ben.”

Luca drags his hand over my pussy before pushing three fingers into me roughly, eliciting a soft moan from me.

“Please don’t hang up,” Ben pleads, thankfully clueless about my predicament.

“It’s fine,” Luca whispers. “Let’s hear him out,” he says, his fingers pumping in and out of me ruthlessly. I moan into the sofa’s cushions when he drags his tongue over my pussy. I can’t even imagine what kind of image I must be presenting him with, my clothes a mess, my ass up in the air, and my face pressed against the sofa.

“I still love you, Val. I know that it’s been years, but I never stopped thinking about you. We were young and immature when we dated, but it’s different now. If you give me another chance, I’ll treat you better.”

Luca’s tongue circles around my clit, withholding what I want most, and I try my hardest to move my hips and reposition him, but he merely chuckles and holds me in place. His fingers stroke my G-spot while his tongue pushes me toward madness. If he keeps going like that, he’ll have me coming on his face in minutes, and he knows it.

“Please,” I moan.

“Please, what?” Ben asks. “Tell me, Val. What can I do to make it better? How do I make up for my mistakes? Is there anything I can do to earn your forgiveness?”

Luca chuckles and flicks his tongue over my clit, and my pussy begins to throb. “Yeah,” he murmurs. “Tell him what you want, Valentina.”

I thrust my hips harder against his face, and he finally gives me what I need. His tongue is as ruthless as his fingers are, and he gets me right to the edge.

“Do you want to come for me, Valentina?” he whispers.

“*Yes*!” I groan.

“Tell me how,” Ben says, his tone frantic. “I’ll do anything.”

Luca chuckles and flicks his tongue over my clit hard, over and over again, until my muscles clamp down on his fingers. “Luca,” I moan, unable to suppress my voice any longer. “Oh God, *Luca*.”

“Good girl,” Luca tells me, no longer whispering. “You’re such a good girl, Valentina. Tell me, baby. Do you want my cock?”

“Yes,” I whimper, my pussy throbbing. “Please, Luca. Please fuck me. Oh God. I need you.”

He grabs my hair and pulls me up until he’s got my back arched before he pushes the tip in. “You want more, baby?” he asks, pushing in just a little deeper. “Tell me you love me, Valentina, and I’ll consider giving you more of my cock.”

The way he’s pulling on my hair just heightens my sensations. It feels so ridiculously good to surrender control to him. “I love you, Luca,” I tell him, my tone pleading. “I love you so much. Please. *Please*.”

He slams all the way into me, and we both moan. “Fuck,” he groans, his hands wrapping around my hips as he takes me hard. “Tell me who this pussy belongs to, Valentina.”

“It’s yours,” I moan. “I’m all yours. Only yours.”

“Good girl,” he murmurs as he reaches around me to grab my phone, startling me. I forgot all about Ben.

I look over my shoulder as Luca keeps fucking me, my phone lifted to his ear. “She warned you that she’s busy, didn’t she? Have you heard enough, or do you want to hear her come for me again?” he asks, his eyes on mine, pure satisfaction on his face as he continues to thrust into me, his movements slower now.

Luca ends the call and drops my phone, his attention returning to me as he increases his pace and intensity, taking me harder than he ever has before. “I warned you,” he tells me. “I told you there’d be hell to pay.”

I smile at him as he pulls almost all the way out before thrusting back into me harshly, deeply. “Luca, if this is hell, I’m willing to burn for all of eternity.”

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Chapter Fifty-One

VALENTINA

I smile to myself as I look around my new office in disbelief. For years, I was envious of Stephen's office — even more so because I was the one who actually did his job. I didn't think I'd ever be recognized for what I do. This truly is a dream come true.

"Are you proud of yourself for sleeping your way to the top?"

I whirl around to find Ben standing in my office, his face red, no doubt from suppressed anger. "Ben," I murmur, my own face flushing as I'm reminded of the last time I spoke to him, a few days ago. I've been scared to run into him ever since, unsure whether I could handle the embarrassment. I can't believe Luca made me so delirious that I didn't care about anything but him. Losing control isn't something I do, yet Luca forced me to.

“I never knew you were such a slut, Val. You didn’t need to go to Luca Windsor if you wanted the job that badly. You should have come to *me*. I told you that I’d give you the job if you gave me another chance, so why did you have to turn to someone like him? Why did you have to lower yourself like that?”

He stares at me with such disgust in his eyes that I can’t help but chuckle. It took a while, but I’m genuinely unfazed by him and his supposedly offensive remarks. Sure, I shouldn’t have picked up the phone, but I won’t feel bad about enjoying my *husband*. “Lower myself? Yeah, I suppose that’s exactly what I did. He did have my face pressed against the sofa, after all.”

Ben’s eyes flash angrily, and he takes a step toward me. “Tell me the truth, Val. Does he have something on you? The way he made you beg and the things he said to you. That isn’t you.”

I smirk and brush my hair out of my face. “Ben, just because you could never make me come doesn’t mean Luca can’t. You’ve never seen or heard me act that way because you’ve never been able to turn me on the way Luca does.”

Pure pain flashes through his eyes, but I have no remorse. “Doesn’t it bother you to know that you paid for this job title with your body? For as long as you work here, Luca is going to demand things from you. Are you going to continue falling to his knees at his every whim, like his own personal whore?”

“You know what?” I tell him. “I haven’t gone on my knees for him yet.” I frown, regret washing over me. “It’s not fair, now that I think about it. I should really remedy that.”

“Is this all a joke to you?” Ben snaps. “Is he the only one you’ve slept with, or have you been sleeping around with all your superiors? Is that how you got this far when you’re still so young?”

I smile at him and shake my head in amusement. “If I slept my way to the top, I wouldn’t have bothered to compete with you at all. I would’ve just been given the job. Is it really so hard for you to admit that you lost to me?” Ben stares at me in disbelief, and I burst out laughing. “You do realize that I was hired by Anne Windsor, Luca’s grandmother? If I’d gone to her and asked her for the job, she would’ve given it to me, no questions asked. She’s the company’s largest shareholder and holds absolute power. The fact that I competed with you at all means I *didn’t* use the connections I have.

Besides, you wouldn't even have been in the running for this job if not for your daddy, you hypocrite."

He grits his teeth and shakes his head. "I'm so disappointed in you," he says. "I thought the world of you. I thought you were different from every other woman I've ever met, and I regretted losing you more than anything else. But you're exactly what you said you'd never become. You're nothing but a rich man's whore. He'll tire of you eventually, and I'm going to enjoy your fall from grace once he does. You wouldn't have this job if not for him, and eventually, you'll lose it because of him, too."

My smile melts off my face as his accusation digs in deep. He knows about my parents, and he knows how much it pains me. How could he stand there and weaponize my past?

"You'll continue to do so." My head snaps up at the sound of Luca's voice. He walks into my office and heads for my desk, a large name plaque in his hands. "For the rest of your life, you'll continue to regret losing her, because you're right, Ben. She's unlike any woman you'll ever meet."

He positions the name plaque he got me so it's facing Ben and me, and I gasp. It reads *Valentina Windsor, Chief Operating Officer.*

Luca looks at me, his gaze pensive. "Perhaps I should've made it read *Valentina Windsor, Luca's personal whore*. Feels like a missed opportunity, doesn't it? Should I get a separate one for our home office?"

My eyes widen, and then startled laughter escapes my lips. Just like that, he makes my pain melt away. Luca wraps his arm around my waist and pulls me into him, a smile on his face. "I love you," he tells me. "And I'm really fucking proud of you. I hope you know that. No one deserves this job more than you do, and I know you're going to take this company to new heights. Windsor Finance and I would be *nothing* without you."

I nod gratefully, and he turns toward Ben, who can't seem to take his eyes off my name plaque. "My wife doesn't need me to fight her battles for her, so I've kept quiet, but I've just about had it with you. I thought I made myself clear over the phone the other day, but it appears you're too fucking dimwitted to read between the lines. Valentina is *mine*. If you can so much as see my wife in your peripheral vision, you're entirely too fucking close to her. I'm not a patient man. The next time I catch you anywhere near her, I might well be inclined to make you disappear altogether." He runs a hand through his hair and narrows his gaze. "After all, you finally no longer have

a valid reason to be near my wife. I don't want you to foul her pretty eyes any further. I don't want to see you reflected in them."

Ben looks at me, his anger turning into despair. "You're married to him," he says, his tone defeated.

"You almost sound disappointed that I'm not merely his *whore*."

Ben runs a hand through his hair, his expression crestfallen. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Why would I? Just who do you think you are to demand an explanation from me?"

Luca hums in agreement, clearly pleased by my words. It's odd how petty he can be sometimes, but it's awfully cute at the same time.

"If you're his wife, why even bother competing for this job? It's clear you were always going to get it."

Luca's grip on me tightens, and I shake my head subtly. "Because I truly keep my personal and professional lives separate. Luca had nothing to do with me getting this job. I was appointed as COO because I *earned* it. I understand that it's a hard concept for you to wrap your head around, Ben, but it's true."

He stares at me, seemingly at a loss for words. "Get out," Luca says. "I don't want to see you anywhere near my wife's office ever again. I highly recommend that you resign, but I'm willing to wait it out. You're a fucking dimwit, so you won't last long, anyway."

Ben throws me one last lingering look before he turns and walks away, regret marring his features. Watching him walk away feels an awful lot like closure. It isn't just that he cheated — he genuinely is a horrible human being, and it pains me to know I was once foolish enough to fall for someone like him.

"You know the plaque can't stay, right?" I murmur.

Luca sighs and glances at it. "I can wait," he whispers. "I'll wait until you're ready to place it on your desk, Valentina. For you, I can be patient."

I stare at him, my heart racing. Keeping our marriage a secret was a key component of our agreement. What would it mean if we tell everyone?

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Chapter Fifty-Two

LUCA

"Where are you taking me?" my wife asks, a big smile on her face. "Sierra, Raven, and Alanna wanted to come over today to celebrate my promotion."

I shake my head as I lead her to our heliport. "Aren't you seeing them next week? I want you to myself today, baby."

The girls decided to have their monthly get-together on the same night as our poker night, so they really only need to wait a couple more days until they get to monopolize my wife's time.

"Fine," she tells me. "But you get to explain to them why they can't come over today."

I groan at the mere thought of the endless complaints my sister will throw at me. Every other week, she sends me an email filled with insults

relating to her not seeing Valentina as much as she used to. From what I understand, Ares receives a similar email, too. I pity the fool that'll end up marrying my sister.

Valentina smirks as I help her into our helicopter. "Tell me," she shouts over the noise. "Where are we going?"

I buckle her in, my eyes momentarily dropping to her wedding ring. She's wearing it a lot more often, and each time I see it on her hand, I can't help but smile. "You'll see."

I watch her closely as we land, taking in the shock and awe in her expression. Just seeing that look in her eyes is worth the effort I had to go through to find out if this place existed, and who it was owned by.

I jump out of the helicopter as soon as the propellors stop spinning and hold my arms open for my wife. She giggles as she jumps toward me, and I catch her, spinning her around before putting her down.

"This can't be real," she says, peering at the perfectly still water in front of us and the large tree that somehow stands right in the middle of the lake, on an island of its own. "I always thought… how is this real?"

I watch her while she watches the scenery, unable to take my eyes off her. I wondered what she'd look like when faced with the image she stuck on her bedroom wall years ago, and I have to admit that this is even better than I expected.

"Come on," I tell her as I grab her hand and lead her to the canoe that's waiting for us. "Let's go see your favorite tree up close."

"Can we?" she asks. "This seems like private property. Are you sure it's okay?"

I smile at her and nod. "It's Windsor property now. I bought it for you, baby." I'd have much preferred it if Xavier had charged me an astronomical fee for transferring it over to me, but instead, the sly fucker asked me for a favor. I consider him a friend, but I don't fully trust anyone other than my siblings. I have no doubt he's going to cash in his favor at a tremendously inconvenient time, and it'll end up costing me more than money would.

It's worth it, though, to see that smile on Valentina's face. I've never seen her look so awed before. I can barely take my eyes off her as I paddle toward her tree. Even I have to admit that it's a beautiful sight. There's hardly any land surrounding it, so it truly seems like it stands in the lake, all by itself. Because the water is so still, the reflection from the sky and the tree are breathtaking too. I can see why this image inspired Valentina so.

I stop paddling once we get closer and sit back, my eyes on my wife. She admires the view, while I take in her beauty. “There truly is nothing I won’t do for you,” I murmur, more to myself than her.

She turns toward me and smiles, her gaze overflowing with the same love I feel for her. “Thank you. This… this is truly a dream come true.”

I grab her hand and hold it in both of mine. “From now on, I’ll make all of your dreams come true.”

She grins at me, her eyes twinkling. “I’ll do the same for you, Luca.”

I shake my head and raise her hand to my lips. “You already have,” I murmur. “You made all of my dreams come true the moment you told me you loved me.”

Valentina blushes and looks away, the biggest smile on her face. I can’t get enough of her. For the rest of our lives, I want to make her smile that way. “Well, come to think of it, there is one wish you can grant,” I tell her, my voice trembling ever so slightly.

She looks at me curiously.

“Can we forget about the contract?” I ask, my entire body tense with nerves. Her eyes widen, and insecurity drowns out the love I saw in her gaze just moments ago. “There are no guarantees in life, Valentina. It’s true that some things just don’t work out, but that’s no reason to live in fear or anticipation of the worst. I understand that what I’m asking for is hard for you, baby. I know what you’re so afraid of, but your fears will never come to pass. I will never stop loving you, and I will never betray you. I’ll never want anyone other than you.”

She looks down at her hands, her expression conveying her torment. How do I convince her to give us an honest chance? “When we first got married, I was convinced that a transactional marriage would be best for us. I thought that it would be best for the terms of our agreement to be clear so that there would be no risk of confusion or getting hurt, but I’ve come to realize that life isn’t all black and white. If it’s you, I’m willing to risk it all. I’m willing to bet that you don’t just want me because I’m a Windsor, and that we’ll be happy together even if there’s nothing tying us together anymore. I’m choosing to believe that you’d be with me, even if I lost it all. In return, will you put your faith in me and our marriage? Will you give us a chance? Please give me a chance to prove that I will always choose you, no matter what choice I’m faced with.”

My wife stares at me, and it’s like time just stops. Never before have I felt this nervous. Never before have the stakes been this high. I’ve never wanted anything as much as I want her unconditional love. I’m not certain my heart can take the blow if she tells me no.

“That wasn’t what we agreed on,” she says, her gaze pleading. “We said that we’d end things at the end of our contract term, even if we think we’re in love.”

“Fuck the agreement,” I tell her, my words rushed and passionate. “Forget about it, baby. It’s rooted in fear and mistrust, and those things should never exist between us. I could board a plane tomorrow that’ll never land, Valentina. There truly are no guarantees in life, except for this one: for as long as I live, I will love you.”

She looks down at her wedding ring and inhales shakily. “Then promise me that you’ll never leave me, Luca. Promise me that you’ll fight for us, even when I inevitably push you away because fear got the best of me. Promise me that you won’t give up on us, even when it looks like there’s no hope left.”

I smile at her and lift her hand to my lips. “I promise that the only thing I won’t ever do for you is let you go. No matter what.”

She nods, despite the obvious fear in her gaze, and relief washes over me. She’s giving us a chance, and I’ll make sure she never regrets it.

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Chapter Fifty-Three

VALENTINA

My heart is racing as I walk into my office wearing my wedding ring, for the very first time. So far, no one has noticed it, and if they have, they haven't said anything at all. I'm not sure if that fills me with relief or disappointment.

I'm scared about the backlash we might face, especially since we're admitting to being married so soon after I was appointed as COO, but I'm more scared to hurt Luca any further.

I hesitate for just a moment before grabbing the plaque Luca got me, and place it on top of my desk. *Valentina Windsor, Chief Operating Officer.*

Seeing *Windsor* paired with my first name used to fill me with unworthiness and fear, but not anymore. A soft giggle escapes my lips, and I briefly bury my face in my hands, feeling oddly giddy. I need to show

Luca. I have no doubt my husband's eyes would fill with that mixture of pride and possessiveness that I can't resist.

My gaze drops to the stack of pink sticky notes on my desk, and I burst out laughing all over again. I can't remember the last time I felt this free, this happy. I really should be getting to work, but there's something I must do first.

"Morning, Val!" Jane calls as I walk past my old desk. An entire team of personal assistants and operations managers stepped in to take over my role, and it surprised me that it took six of them to do what I managed to do all by myself. "The boss has a meeting in about fifteen minutes, so I don't think he has a lot of free time this morning."

I grin at her and nod in thanks as I walk into Luca's office. He looks up from his computer, and his serious expression melts away, making way for a smile. "I thought you'd have left your office already," I murmur. Back when I was his secretary, we were always present at meetings at least ten minutes ahead of schedule. "Don't tell me you're already destroying my carefully crafted routines?"

Luca leans back in his seat, his eyes roaming over the red blouse I'm wearing. "And what were you planning on doing in my office while I wasn't there?" he asks, his gaze settling on my cleavage.

I walk up to him and hold up the pink sticky note I'd been hiding behind my back. "I came to stick this onto your screen," I murmur as I carefully place my note. "You're totally ruining my surprise."

I love you

- Mrs. Windsor

PS. I have a confession to make. Come to my office after your meeting.

His eyes light up as he reads my note. "This one is my favorite one so far," he murmurs, his gaze filled with the expression I was hoping he'd carry. Love, pride, possessiveness.

"What is the confession?" Luca asks as he grabs my hand. His eyes widen when he realizes I'm wearing my wedding ring. "You didn't take it off," he whispers, awed. He looks up at me and rises from his chair, his hands wrapping around my waist. "I know you said yes, but I wasn't sure you truly meant it. I thought you'd want to move slowly, and I was scared to push for more than you were ready to give me. Baby, this… you have no idea how happy this makes me."

I lift his empty hand and stare at it, a frown on my face. “When have I ever gone back on my word?” I ask as I press his hand against my cheek and lean in, my eyes falling closed for a moment. “This won’t do.”

I let go of his hand and grab his tie, undoing it in one smooth move. Luca smiles and bites down on his lip as he tightens his grip on my waist.

My eyes are on his as I grab the necklace around his neck. “Let’s get rid of this,” I tell him, my last few remaining doubts melting away as I undo the chain. I grab his ring and push it onto his finger with a wide smile on my face.

“You’re sure?” he asks, a hint of doubt in his voice. “There’s no going back from this point, Valentina. I will never let you go, and from this moment forward, you’ll never escape the Windsor name.”

My ring could be passed off as an heirloom piece or a gift, but his is very obviously a wedding ring. Within hours, rumors about us will have reached as far as the mailroom.

I nod. “I’ve never been more sure. I love you, Luca. There’s not a single doubt in my mind. I want it all with you.”

His hand threads through my hair, and he pulls me into him roughly, his lips finding mine with the kind of desperation that makes me lose all reason. He kisses me slowly and deeply, leaving me trembling with need by the time he pulls away. His forehead drops to mine, his breathing ragged. “Let me cancel my meeting.”

I chuckle and press another quick kiss to his lips. “Absolutely not.”

“Please?”

I bite down on his lower lip before pressing another kiss to the edge of his mouth. “Don’t even dream about it.” He groans and sends me a pleading look, making me laugh. “Come to my office after the meeting for that confession I owe you.”

He raises a brow and shakes his head. “You’re going to leave me in anticipation all morning, aren’t you?”

I take a step away from him with the biggest smile on my face. “Of course.”

The smile melts off my face when I turn around to find three of our personal assistants gawking through the windows, their eyes wide. Did they… did they just see us… “Oh God.” How could I have forgotten about them? My old desk looks straight into this office.

Luca laughs, and I throw him a glare, but that doesn't dissuade him. "Finally," he tells me, his gaze filled with glee.

I shake my head as I walk out of his office, my face blazing. None of the assistants can look me in the eye, their faces as red as I'm sure mine is. I'm still reeling by the time I sink into my own chair, safely hidden away in my office.

He really does make me lose my icy cool. When I'm around him, I turn back into a version of myself I thought I'd lost. Is it okay for me to be this happy? Am I asking for too much when I pray that this will last forever?

I sigh, my happiness fading a little when I browse through my emails. Looks like Jessica is refusing to entertain our offer to purchase unless Luca is personally in charge of the acquisition. The thought of that makes me uncomfortable, and I hate that it does. I want to be able to trust my husband, especially because he deserves my trust more than anyone else.

"Valentina."

I look up in surprise and check my watch. "Luca, it's been fifteen minutes since I left your office."

He shrugs as he walks toward me. "That meeting was bullshit, anyway. It could've been an email, so I was able to wrap it up qui—" His sentence trails off as his eyes zone in on the name plaque on my desk.

"Fuck," he groans, his expression one I'll never forget. He pauses in front of my desk and lets his fingers trail over the writing. So this is what true happiness looks like, what it *feels* like.

"The confession," he asks, his gaze moving between the plaque and me continuously, as though he can't tear his eyes off it. "What is it?"

When he looks at me that way, all of my worries are laid to rest. I promised him that I'd give us an honest chance, so that's exactly what I'll do. I grab the remote control on my desk and turn my windows opaque, refusing to make the same mistake as earlier. Luca's eyes widen, and then he smirks mischievously before walking up to me.

"Promise you'll forgive me?" I ask as I rise from my chair and push against him, making him fall onto it instead.

He smirks at me as he leans back, spellbound. "You know I will, because you'd never do something I couldn't forgive you for."

"I wouldn't be so sure." He raises his brows as I drop down to my knees between his legs. "This is an elaborate ruse that spanned years and years. I had you completely fooled."

For a moment, I see his faith in me waver, but then I place my hands on his knees, and he smiles. “Tell me, baby.”

I slide my hands up his thighs slowly as I look up at him, barely able to suppress my smile. “Luca… I don’t like the color pink.”

He bursts out laughing and buries a hand in my hair. “*What*? The markers and sticky notes? The pens, the paperclips? The meeting notes you’d hand me printed on pink paper?”

I undo his trousers and grab his cock, delighted to find him already hard for me. I lick my lips and rest the tip of his cock against my mouth. “I only did it because I know how much you *despise* pink. I’m sorry, babe. I definitely deserve punishment for deceiving you that way, don’t I?”

“Yes,” he says as he guides his cock into my mouth. “You do.”

He grabs a fistful of my hair as I take him deeper, my tongue teasing him endlessly. Knowing how badly he wants me has my own desire rising rapidly. There’s something special about being truly wanted.

“My beautiful little liar,” he murmurs, pulling his cock all the way out of my mouth. I groan in disappointment, and he smirks as he rises to his feet, until I’m at eye level with his cock. He grabs it, his wedding ring a beautiful sight as he curls his fingers around it. “I’m going to fuck your face and punish you for the torment you put me through.”

He holds onto my hair as he gently pushes his cock back into my mouth, holding me still as he uses my mouth. He’s the only one I’ll ever submit to, and he knows it, revels in it.

“I fucking love you,” he groans as he thrusts a little harder, a little faster, but never enough to make me gag or choke. I look up at him to find him staring at me with utter devotion, and I suck down on him even harder.

I didn’t think I had a heart left to give, but perhaps that’s because he stole it long before I realized it.

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Chapter Fifty-Four

LUCA

I glance at my pocket watch and smile at the photo of Valentina inside it. My father once told me he'd hand it down to me if I ever got married, and that I should put a picture of my wife in it then. I didn't think I could ever bear to replace the old, faded photo of my mother, but I understand it now.

I get why my dad told me to put a photo of my wife in this pocket watch. It gives me perspective and reminds me what I'm doing this all for. It reminds me that every second not spent efficiently is a second I could've spent with her — which is why I'm even more annoyed to be sitting here.

"The price you offered is fair, I have to say," Jessica tells me.

I snap my watch closed and sigh. "Then why did you insist on meeting with me instead of just accepting our offer?"

She glances at my ring every few minutes, her expression unreadable. I know she wants to ask if it's a wedding ring, but surprisingly, she hasn't. It annoys me to look at her, but even more so, it annoys me that Valentina told me to attend this meeting at all.

I know why my wife did this. She's trying to show me that she truly is giving our marriage a chance and that she's choosing to trust me despite her insecurities. She's trying to prove that she won't let our private life interfere with our business goals, but that's not what I want.

I want her to lose her cool over me, the way I do with every single man that comes near her. I want her to act jealous and irrational, because she can't control herself when it comes to me. Every once in a while, I want her to act as crazy as I do. I need to know that she loves me the same, that I drive her insane.

"Do you truly not know why I asked you to meet with me in person?"

I sigh and run a hand through my hair. "No, and to be honest, I don't care either. I genuinely couldn't care less if you decline our offer. It wasn't my decision to acquire Metric, anyway. I'm literally only here because I was told to."

I just want to go home already. I've sat through half an hour of this shit, and I want to see my wife. At first, I was certain she'd show up, that she wouldn't let me sit through a dinner with my fucking *ex*, but she hasn't. Every second that she isn't here adds to the frustration I feel.

I'm still uneasy around Valentina, scared that she'll change her mind, or that she doesn't really feel the way I do. It annoys me that she can so easily separate work and our private life, when I absolutely can't. I'd let my whole fucking company collapse if it made her happy, but she won't even pass up one acquisition, going as far as to send me out for dinner with my goddamn ex.

"What do you mean?" Jessica asks. "If it wasn't your decision, whose was it?"

"Mine."

I sit up, a smile slowly spreading across my face as my heart starts to race. Valentina's eyes meet mine, and the hint of insecurity I see in them puts me at ease. It's toxic, and it's crazy, and I fucking know it, but I don't care.

I rise to my feet and drag a chair to the small, crowded table Jessica and I are seated at, suddenly grateful that the space is so limited. She'll have to

sit right next to me, my leg against hers.

“I’m Valentina,” she says. “Windsor Finance’s Chief Operating Officer, and the person in charge of our expansion plans.”

The two women shake hands, and Jessica looks visibly unnerved when Valentina sits down next to me. I place my hand on her thigh and lean in, my lips brushing over her ear. “Good girl,” I whisper. “You deserve a reward for showing up here.”

My wife turns her face, and her nose brushes against mine. “You’re not mad?” she whispers.

“Quite the contrary.”

I smile at her as she hands Jessica a document outlining our offer. “I apologize for showing up so late,” she says, her tone perfectly professional. “Luca asked me to join, but I had a meeting that ran late, and I didn’t think I’d be able to make it.”

When she’s like this, I can’t resist her. It makes me want to mess with her and break that icy control of hers. She’s so fucking sexy when she’s negotiating a deal. She has no idea how many meetings I’ve had to sit through with my cock throbbing, my mind filled with fantasies of her.

Jessica stares at my wife as she outlines the terms of our offer, her gaze dropping to my wedding ring occasionally. I’m glad Valentina showed up, but she should’ve introduced herself as Valentina *Windsor*. Perhaps it isn’t a reward she deserves, but rather, punishment instead.

“Our offer would not result in a change in—” My hand slides up her thigh and underneath her skirt, and her voice falters as I angle my body toward her to make my movements less suspicious. “In... in management.”

Her cheeks flush as I stare at her, pretending to be engrossed in what she’s saying while I push aside her underwear.

“Joining Windsor Finance would give Metric access to additional funding and research that is—” I drag a finger over her pussy, finding her getting wetter by the second. “That is… proprietary to our firm.” I thought that perhaps she’d throw me a warning look, but instead, she spreads her legs for me, giving me better access.

I slip two fingers into her, and her pussy swallows them. There’s something about this woman that just drives me fucking insane. I don’t think my cock has ever been this hard before. Nothing brings me more joy than teasing an orgasm out of her when she’s trying her best to hold on to that control she loves so much.

“So you propose a partnership of sorts?” Jessica asks, her eyes moving between the two of us. The discomfort on her face makes me wonder if she knows what’s going on underneath the table, or whether she’s just uncomfortable because of how close I’m sitting to Valentina. It isn’t in the least professional, and she knows it. There’s no mistaking here — it’s obvious that Valentina and I aren’t mere colleagues.

“Exactly,” Valentina says. She smiles brightly as she grabs my wine glass, leaving a lipstick mark on it as she drinks some of it.

I swipe my thumb over her clit harshly, and she bites down on her lip for a moment. Initially, I just wanted to tease her, but now I want to make her come, right here, at this table.

My eyes drop to my glass as I increase the pressure against her clit, teasing her harder, rougher. With my free hand, I turn my glass until the mark she left is facing me, and then I pick it up, taking a sip of wine, my lips against the lipstick stain she left. I think I may actually be obsessed with my wife.

Jessica grits her teeth, and Valentina squirms, unable to sit still as I take her right to the edge. My fingers are soaking wet, and her pussy is perfectly slippery. It’d be so easy to slip my cock right into her, and I want nothing more. How quickly can I get her home? If I leave her hanging, will she cut this meeting short?

I lean into her and brush my lips over her ear as I touch her harder, pushing my fingers in deeper. “I want you to come for me,” I whisper.

Her breathing is uneven, and when I pull away, she’s looking at me with flushed cheeks and such intense need in her eyes that I could fucking come just at the sight of her.

“Luca,” she whispers as she shakes her head, my name a plea on her lips. I chuckle, my heart overflowing with love for her. I’m crazy about her.

I thread my hand through her hair and pull her face toward mine roughly. My lips come crashing down against hers, and she moans into my mouth as I make her come, her pussy clamping down on my fingers. I really fucking love this woman, with all my heart. I’ve never felt anything like this before, and I don’t think I’ll ever get enough of her.

She tears her lips off mine and drops her forehead against my shoulder, her body trembling slightly as I pull my fingers away, pure fucking satisfaction flowing through me.

“I apologize,” I tell Jessica, who looks at us with an expression that can only be described as jealousy and torment. “My wife isn’t feeling too well, it seems. I’d better take her home.”

“Wife?” she repeats, her gaze filling with regret and defeat.

I wrap my arm around Valentina, who can’t bring herself to lift her face. She’s too fucking cute, and I have no doubt that she’ll make me pay for this the second we get home. I just couldn’t help myself. “Yeah,” I murmur. “*My wife*.”

Valentina looks into my eyes, clearly flustered, and I can’t help but chuckle. “You’re the one who made me come here,” I tell her, unable to wipe the smile off my face. “Now that you’ve… come… too and outlined the offer, we can finally wrap this up and go home, right?”

Her eyes flash, but I see the way she tries to suppress a smile as she turns toward Jessica. “I truly apologize,” Valentina says. “My husband is right. I’m feeling somewhat out of it tonight. Please contact me directly if you’d like to further discuss our offer, and we’ll reschedule.”

Finally. I can’t wait to get her to bed and lay to rest any insecurities she may still have. One by one, I’ll make them vanish, until she’s certain that she’s it for me.

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Chapter Fifty-Five

LUCA

I sigh in irritation as I walk toward Lexington's house for poker night. I really wish I could've just stayed home with my wife, which is fucking insane, because poker night used to be the highlight of my month. I used to love hanging out with my brothers, but now it feels like I'm sacrificing time with my wife. I can't skip tonight, though, since even Dion made it back for this one. If he can make it here from London, I unfortunately have no excuse not to walk over, considering it's only ten minutes to Lex's house.

I frown when I find Xavier and Zane loitering by Lex's front door, lost in a seemingly intense conversation. . "It couldn't have been her," Zane says, his voice strained.

"Couldn't have been *who*?" I ask.

Both men look up in surprise, and I raise a brow. Zane looks away and runs a hand through his hair, his expression tormented. What in the hell has him so rattled?

I glance at Xavier and cross my arms. “Speak up, or I’ll tell Sierra that you’ve been crashing our monthly poker nights. What do you think she’ll do with that information?”

Honestly, the possibilities are endless. Sierra hates Xavier, so she could show up at poker night and antagonize him, she could tell our security team to ban him from entering our premises, or she could use his location knowledge against him — one night a month where she knows for sure where he’ll be? That information is dangerous in her hands.

I honestly have no idea why a man like Xavier lets my sister get away with so much shit. She fucking torments him. If I were him, I’d already have had her arrested for some of the shit she pulls. I guess he doesn’t out of courtesy toward us and the friendship we’ve forged over the years.

“Celeste,” Xavier says, and the smile melts off my face.

“What?” I glance at Zane, concerned. No wonder my usual quiet and unshakeable brother seems so frenzied.

“I told her I’d make her pay if she ever dared appear in front of me again,” he says, his voice soft. “So, for her sake, I hope she stays far away.”

I nod, worried. Zane tries to shake it off and walks into the house, but the mere mention of her has him rattled. I hope she doesn’t go anywhere near him, but even I know that it’s inevitable. Those two are like a moth and a flame — I just can’t tell which is which.

“Where’s Dion?” I ask as I sit down.

Lexington shrugs and pours me a drink. “He said something came up, so he’s running late. He said to start without him.”

I nod and take a sip of my drink, my gaze roaming over my brothers. Everyone looks excited to be here and catch up, except for Ares and me. He catches my eye and smiles knowingly as he holds up his glass.

I tap my glass against his, and he shakes his head. “I guess I’m forgiven for instigating you when you rocked up here drunk a few months ago?”

I smile as Lex deals the cards. “I forgave you the second Valentina agreed to marry me.”

Ares chuckles. “Make sure you pay it forward. One by one, these idiots are going to fall. Since you and I both found happiness thanks to the little pushes we received, it’s only fair we return the favor.”

I nod and raise my glass. Ares is right, of course. All of us can be fucking idiots, but our saving grace is our bond, our family.

“There’s no way you’re not cheating,” Xavier says, his eyes flashing with irritation. Xavier doesn’t like to lose, which makes it all the more confusing that he continues to lose high value real estate deals to my sister. I could barely even get him to give up the land that Valentina’s tree is on.

“Yeah man,” Lex says. “That’s three times in a row you’ve won. It’s bullshit.”

I shrug. “What can I say? Just feeling lucky tonight.” Valentina gave me a lucky kiss before I left the house, and I’m convinced that’s what’s causing my lucky streak. It also helps that she told me she’d let me fuck her face if I *won* money instead of losing any. My wife does not like making a loss, and I don’t like letting her down.

“Disgusting,” Zane says, his eyes narrowed. His mood is still subdued, but he seems better now than he did outside. “It’s obvious you’re thinking about Val, and that’s fucking gross.”

“Yeah,” Lex agrees. “She’s like a sister to us, asshole. Keep those nasty thoughts of yours off your fucking face.” He shudders and throws a glare my way.

“What the fuck is with all this abuse? For what? For thinking about *my wife*?”

“Ugh,” Xavier says. “*My wife*,” he mimics me, ridiculing me. “You sound like fucking Ares. Marriage ruined both of you. Fucking repulsive.”

I glance at Ares for support, but he just shrugs his shoulders, unfazed. “Leave them be,” he tells me. “Just wait until it’s their turn. Karma is a bitch.”

Lexington pulls a face. “I will never become a fool over a woman.”

Ares and I exchange a look before both smiling knowingly. “Right,” we both say, in unison. Lexington is our youngest brother, and out of all of us, he’s the most sensitive. He’ll fall the hardest, and it’ll be so fucking amusing to witness.

The door opens behind us, and Dion walks in, his expression filled with rage as he joins us at the table. He doesn’t say a word as he grabs my glass and empties it before slamming it down.

“Deal,” he tells Lex, tapping the table.

Much to my surprise, Lex does as he asks without a single complaint and deals the cards, his gaze filled with concern. Dion never loses his

temper, so none of us know how to deal with him when he's like this.

Even when we were kids, he was the one who would never argue over toys, and he'd never entertain our attempts to instigate fights. He's always been extremely calm and level-headed, even more so than Ares. But ultimately, he's a Windsor, and there's only one thing that could possibly affect any of us this way.

"Did you see Faye today?" I ask, my voice soft, patient. He's always pretended not to care about his fiancée, but I know he isn't entirely unaffected when it comes to her. I saw the way he looked at her when he danced with her at Ares's wedding. He looked at her the way Ares looked at Raven. With desire he seemed to feel guilty about.

Dion looks up sharply, surprised. "Did you know?" His tone is accusing, sharp.

I shake my head in confusion, and he turns toward Zane instead. "*You* must have known. Tell me you didn't fucking hide this from me, Zane."

Zane holds his hands up and shakes his head. "I have no idea what you're talking about," he instantly denies. "What happened?"

Dion slumps in his seat and runs a hand through his hair. "I ran into her at one of your hotels today," he tells Zane. "She was on her way up to one of the rooms… with her *boyfriend*."

The room falls silent, none of us sure what to say. "Fuck," I mutter. Despite being engaged, Faye and Dion aren't even really on speaking terms. I'd understand it if either of them hooked up casually prior to getting married, but being in an actual relationship when their wedding is in a few months? The mere thought of Valentina being in love with someone else makes me sick. I can't even imagine how Dion must be feeling.

"What are you going to do? Did she ask you to break off the engagement?" Lex asks.

"No," he says, grimacing. "She *begged* me not to. Besides, it's not like I could even if I wanted to. Do you really think I'd be marrying her if I could get out of it?"

I inhale deeply as I refill my glass. Even Ares looks like he's at a loss for words. I always hoped Faye and Dion would make things work, but how can they, with so much standing between them?

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Chapter Fifty-Six

VALENTINA

I smile when Jessica signs the contract, her eyes moving back and forth between the name plaque on my desk and the papers in front of her. Shortly after our meeting with her, Luca sent out a company memo announcing our marriage and retracting the no-fraternization rule, and much to my surprise, there was no backlash whatsoever. I was so certain that people would talk behind my back about how I'd slept my way up the corporate ladder, but I haven't even heard whispers of the sort.

I've heard some complaints about Luca being taken now, and surprisingly, I've had quite a few heartbroken looks thrown my way too, but no one has spoken maliciously about us. There have been some jokes about the way Luca implemented the no-fraternization rule, and from what I understand, Theo is going around telling everyone that he knew about us *all*

along, but there haven't been any rude comments. If anything, in the weeks since, everyone has continued to congratulate and celebrate us. I never realized how many of our employees genuinely wanted to see us together. More than once, I've been told that we're a cohesive unit that they feel they can truly put their trust in. I don't think I've ever been happier.

"I look forward to working together," Jessica tells me, her expression grim. I have no doubt she didn't want to sign this deal at all, but our offer was too good to pass up. She's staying in her position as CEO, and all we're really asking for is to use the intellectual property and technology they developed. In return, they're getting additional investment funds and access to most of our resources, facilitating growth beyond what they can achieve by themselves.

"So do I," I reply as I shake her hand.

Jessica's gaze drops back to my name plaque, and then she huffs. "I'm surprised he'd marry someone like you. What is he trying to do? Is he trying to circumvent his grandmother's terms by pretending he's in love with you?"

The smile melts off my face, and I sigh. Our employees might be happy for us, but more than one person from Luca's social circle has questioned our marriage. Many of them seem to think he couldn't possibly love me. Perhaps it's because they witnessed how cold and professional we've been throughout the years, even when I attended events with him. Or perhaps it's simply that they think I'm not good enough for Luca. More than once, I've heard his acquaintances whisper about how they think it's ridiculous to end an engagement with the Ivanovs over someone like me.

"Don't be that woman," I tell her, my expression neutral. "Don't tear down another woman just because she has what wasn't meant for you. You'll find your own happiness, Jessica. I'm sure of it."

She frowns at me and crosses her arms. "Don't act so high and mighty around me," she snaps. "I know him better than anyone else. I'm the only woman he's actually truly loved, and that little public display of affection at dinner? It wasn't love. It was simple lust, an act put on for *me* to see. He's using you and having some fun while he's at it, but when your time is up, he'll walk away and never look back. The longer you're together, the clearer it'll become that you will never fit into our world, and the harder you try, the more you'll get hurt."

She takes a step back and smiles. “But there’s no point in telling you that, because time will do it for me. I hope you enjoy it while it lasts. I know how much fun being with Luca can be. He really does have this way of making you feel like you’re the one for him, like he’s never felt that way about anyone else. I guess it’s because he has such single-minded focus. Too bad he doesn’t have a great attention span, though. It’d be nice if that focus of his never shifted, huh?”

She chuckles as she walks out of my office, and I sit back, rattled. I didn’t want to let her get to me, but she just mirrored my exact fears. What happens when Luca finally realizes that we truly are too different? What if his attention does shift? It wouldn’t surprise me if he chooses to abandon me once I’m no longer useful to him — if anything, I expected him to do so for the longest time. Was I foolish for thinking that these feelings could last?

“Valentina?”

I’m snapped out of my thoughts by his voice and look up to find him leaning in my doorway, a hint of concern in his eyes.

“What’s wrong, baby? Did something go wrong with the Metric deal?”

I shake my head and rise to my feet, meeting him halfway. He wraps one arm around my waist and gently cups my face. “Then what’s wrong? Is it something Jessica said?”

I look into his eyes and sigh. “Will you always look at me this way?” I ask, the words escaping my lips without thinking.

“Always,” he replies instantly.

I smile and wrap my arms around his neck. “You don’t even know what I’m talking about.”

“I don’t need to. I know that I’ll always love you the same.”

“Even if I get old and wrinkly?”

He nods. “Yep. I’ll memorize each of your wrinkles and take them as signs of years we happily spent together. I’ll be aging right along with you, my love. Will you no longer love me the same if my six-pack disappears? What if my hair falls out?”

I purse my lips and shake my head. “I’m not sure, you know? I do love you mostly for your pretty face.”

Luca chuckles and pulls me closer as he tilts his head and kisses me, once, twice, before he pulls away, his touch gentle. “No marriage is perfect, and we’ll go through seasons in life. There will be times that we’re happier

than others, but through it all, I'll be by your side. That much I can promise you. I can't put to rest all of your fears, not just yet, but ten years from now, we'll look back at this moment and I'll tell you *I told you so*."

I rise to my tiptoes and kiss him, my heart heavy. I didn't think I'd ever put my faith in a man again, yet here I am, wanting to believe every single one of his words. "I can't wait for that day," I murmur.

Luca threads a hand through my hair and smiles, his gaze overflowing with love. "Me neither, baby, but let's not forget to enjoy every step along the way, all right?"

I nod, my worries put to rest. "I love you," I tell him. "I've never told you this, but I'm grateful that you don't demand my trust or faith, nor do you punish me for my insecurities. I know I'm not the easiest person to be married to, but you… Luca, if soulmates exist, I think you might be mine."

The way he smiles at me makes my heart skip a beat. He leans in, but just before his lips meet mine, both of our phones start to ring.

I step back and frown as I grab my phone from my desk. "Hey mom," I murmur, surprised that she'd call me when she knows Luca and I are coming over in just an hour or so. We promised to spend this weekend with Abuela and her, after all.

"Val," she says, her voice sounding strained. "Abuela… please come home, okay? Please."

I glance at Luca, who's staring back at me, his face pale and his own phone pressed to his ear. His hand drops to his side and his phone slips out of it, the sound of it clattering to the floor loud in my quiet office. The heartbreak in his eyes tells me everything my mother couldn't say.

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Chapter Fifty-Seven

VALENTINA

I stare at the closed casket in front of me, my eyes filling with tears all over again. I got one final look at her, and it kills me to know I'll never see her again. Abuela looked so beautiful, lying there in her favorite dress. I've been trying to come to terms with the news, but it didn't seem real until we arrived at the cemetery, the place filled with those that loved her.

Luca's arm wraps around my waist, and I lean into him for support. He hasn't left my side since we got the call. It all seems like a blur to me, but I remember fragments of him putting me in the shower, and asking both my mother and me to eat something. He's taken care of us to the best of his abilities, and if not for him, I'm not sure I'd have it in me to stand here today.

"Val."

I look up to find Grandma Anne, Sierra, Raven, Ares, Dion, Zane, and Lexington standing in front of me, their gazes filled with grief.

“What are you all doing here?” I murmur. I figured a few of them would drop by, but I didn’t think Dion would fly in for my abuela’s funeral.

Zane gently brushes my hair out of my face and sighs. “We’re your family,” he tells me. Sierra wraps an arm around me, and Raven presses a sweet kiss to my forehead. That’s all it takes for me to finally burst into tears, a sob tearing through my throat.

I’ve been trying my hardest not to cry, because today should be about celebrating her life, not mourning her death. Yet all I can think about is the gaping hole she’s left behind. My chest is burning, and I can’t control my thoughts. My knees give in, and I nearly drop to the floor, but Luca and Sierra hold me up.

Luca pulls me into him and wraps me in his embrace as I try my hardest to choke back my sobs, unable to keep my tears from spilling. My own tears trigger my mother’s, and Luca wraps an arm around her too, holding both of us tightly as we fall apart.

“H-how could she leave m-me behind?” I ask, unable to come to terms with the loss of the woman I loved most. Abuela passed peacefully during a nap she never woke up from, but it feels so unfair. I did everything in my power to give her the best medical care money can buy, and it still wasn’t enough.

“It was her time,” my mother tells me. “She… she’s with your abuelo now, sweetheart.”

Without my abuela, I’m lost. She was my rock, my only constant in life, and the only one who loved me unconditionally. Guilt fuels my thoughts, reminding me of each time I neglected her in favor of work, each instance a sin I will never be able to atone for.

I’m consumed by questions I don’t have an answer to. Why did I work so hard? What for? Why didn’t I spend more time with her? She once asked me what I’d have once I got to her age, what memories I’d have made. I realize now that she was asking me to live my life to the fullest, and I failed her. Luca holds me tightly, until my tears dry up. My heart has never felt this broken before. I’ve lost so much throughout the years, but nothing ever broke me like this did.

“You don’t have to do this if you don’t want to,” Luca tells me when the priest motions for me to step forward. As Abuela’s only granddaughter, I’m

meant to share uplifting stories of her, as a way to honor her memory and soothe the pain of those that have gathered to celebrate her life. It's the hardest thing I'll ever do, but I won't fail her. This is the last thing I get to do for her, after all.

Luca squeezes my hand before letting go, his eyes never leaving me as I take my place in front of the microphone. I have no idea what I'd do without him. He's taken care of every single detail, right down to speaking to the insurance people and coordinating with the funeral home. He lent me his strength, and I'm not sure how to repay him.

"Thank you so much for gathering here today to celebrate the extraordinary life my grandmother has lived," I tell the crowd. I see so many familiar faces, all of them with tears in their eyes. Abuela was my world, but it's clear she impacted so many other lives, too. It's like our entire neighborhood has gathered here. Almost every store near us is closed, because everyone is here.

"My abuela," I murmur, my voice breaking. "She was everything to me. She was my role model, my biggest cheerleader, my best friend. The mere idea of navigating life without her guidance terrifies me, but I know that the lessons she instilled in me will carry me through."

Luca looks at me with such pride, as though he knows how hard it is for me to stand here, and a little bit of the weight on my shoulders is lifted. "When I think of my abuela, I think of laughter, life lessons, warm hugs, and endless mischief. One of my favorite memories of her is actually a very recent one. Some of you may know that I got married a few months ago, and I wasn't sure how to tell her. It was a relatively impulsive decision, and I was scared she'd be mad at me, or that she wouldn't accept me eloping and depriving her of attending my wedding. I was trembling when I took my husband home, but the moment she found out we got married, she just laughed and told me it was about time. She taunted me and teased me, reminding me of all the times I'd secretly badmouthed my husband in the years before we fell in love. I didn't realize it at the time, but she did what she could to make the situation as easy for me as possible, all the while giving me her unconditional support and acceptance, like she always has. That's what she did, you know? She made you feel welcome and loved, no matter who you were. She treated everyone with that very same warmth."

I take a steadying breath as those around me smile, and for a moment, it feels like she's here with me, happy to hear me honoring happy memories

instead of crying over her.

“Abuela and my husband thought I was unaware, but I know she called him all the time, checking up on me and telling him stories of my childhood. There were times he’d come home with specific snacks or small presents, and I’d know that he’d spoken to my abuela recently, because she was the only one who knew me that well. I didn’t realize it then, but she must have been passing down her role to him. She must have wanted to ensure I’d never miss out on the things I loved most, because she knew I’d never speak up about the little things that make me happy. That’s who she was. Most of you present here have experienced her kindness, her unique way of making you feel so special. She’d enter a room, and you’d smile, because you could never be sure what she’d say. She was unpredictable, funny, and so incredibly sweet. I wouldn’t be who I am without her, and I know the same is true for so many of you here too. She’s fed so many of us, and she was always there with a kind smile and even kinder words. I will always remember her that way, and I hope you do too.”

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Chapter Fifty-Eight

LUCA

I walk into Valentina's childhood bedroom to find the curtains drawn, her small frame huddled beneath the blankets. It's been over a week, and she's refused to leave her bed unless I make her.

A soft sigh escapes my lips as I crawl into bed with her and spoon her, my hand wrapping around her waist, her head against my chest.

She tenses for a moment, but she doesn't say a word. It's been days since we had a real conversation, and nothing I do or say gets a response. I'm growing increasingly worried about her, and it kills me that I don't know how to make her feel better.

"There's something I haven't told you," I admit, unsure if now is the right time. She doesn't respond, not even when I tighten my hold on her. "A few days… *before*… I had lunch with Abuela. You see, the ladies she plays

lotería with didn't believe that you got married. She'd shown them news articles of me and bragged about her grandson-in-law being a Windsor, but they accused her of lying." I chuckle as I think back to that day. "She called me and demanded that I come over right away. She sounded a lot like you do sometimes, the way she ordered me around. I finally realized where you got that attitude of yours. From the way she was talking, it was obvious that she had me on speakerphone. I heard the ladies with her taunting her, saying how she was taking her joke too far."

She turns a little, her eyes roaming over my face. It's the first time she's even properly looked at me in days.

"Naturally, I dropped everything to go see her. I took my most expensive car and drove to the community center she was playing lotería at, not in the least surprised to find her standing on the curb with her friends, waiting for me. I pulled up in front of them and left my car right there on the street, making a big show of it. I walked up to her and lifted her into my arms, twirling her around the way I would do with you. She laughed, and I think it's the happiest *I'd* ever been, other than when I'm with you. She looked so proud and vindictive as she introduced me to her friends. I'd never seen her that way, but I played along the entire time, and she loved every second of it."

"Really?" Valentina asks, and I nod. She turns to face me, and my heart starts to race. She's so close, but there's never been more distance between us.

"That's not all, though. About twenty minutes after I got there, the police arrived, telling me they'd tow my car if I didn't move it. Abuela never knew, but I'd actually set up the whole thing. When she called me, I had a pretty good idea of what was going on, so I figured that if I was going to avenge her for the ridicule she had to endure because of me, I'd better do it right. So the police are there, right? But seconds later, Zachary Kingston pulls up right next to my car, a police escort with him. Instantly, the traffic police steps away and apologizes."

Valentina stares at me wide-eyed, her gaze enraptured. "When we got married, Zach told me that something like marrying us couldn't be used to repay the favor I did for him, so according to him, he still owed me one. I cashed it in that day. He made a really big deal out of greeting me, and then he profusely apologized for being late for our meeting, saying that he'd struggled to make it in time because the meeting location changed so

suddenly. He told all of your abuela's friends that she must be incredibly important to me, and that they'd better never offend her." A soft laugh escapes my lips as I shake my head. "We had no meeting whatsoever planned, but he played his role perfectly. So there Abuela was, with both me and the mayor standing by her side. Her friends all freaked out, and she was so insanely proud. I don't think I've ever seen her happier."

"Why did she never tell me this?"

I cup her face gently and press a kiss to her forehead. "When I took her home, she made me promise I wouldn't tell you. As the excitement wore down, she felt embarrassed. She told me that she'd raised you to be better than she was that day, and that she didn't want you to know how petty she'd acted. Abuela was worried you'd think less of her, so I promised to keep my mouth shut in return for a favor. I hope she'll forgive me for telling you now."

"What favor?" My wife asks, frowning.

I laugh and grab my phone. "I asked her to record a message for me I could show you if we ever had a huge argument. Something that would make you forgive me right away. Her condition had been deteriorating by then, and I wanted something I could hold on to throughout the years." I show her the video, and tears gather in her eyes as I press play.

"Val," Abuela says on the screen. "Don't be mad at Luca, okay? That man loves you more than anything, but he is still a man, and they are *dumb*, Princesa."

Valentina laughs then, and it's the first time I've heard her laugh since we got the news. I stare at my wife in awe as she watches the video, and I silently thank Abuela for returning her smile when I couldn't.

"Every time you've brought him home, he's never looked away from you for more than five seconds. When he thinks you're not looking, he smiles as if he won the jackpot, because ese estúpido niño thinks you're the biggest prize."

In the background, you can hear me muttering, "*Are you calling me stupid, Abuela? Even I know what that means!*" and Valentina laughs through her tears, her eyes meeting mine for a moment.

Abuela side-eyes me in the video before turning back to the camera. "He means well, Princesa. Knowing Luca, he probably didn't mean to hurt you. If you think you can forgive him, then please do. Don't stay mad for too long. Don't waste this precious time together, okay? He loves you, and

so do I.” She pauses then, her eyes narrowing. “But if you think you can’t forgive him, just come home, Val. I will beat him for you if you want me to, okay?”

At this point, I clearly grab my phone back from her, and the sound of her laughter fills the video. “She is my granddaughter,” she tells me, as the screen portrays the tiles on the curb. “I love her the most, and I will always take her side.”

“You were supposed to take my side this time, Abuela. You don’t even know what I’ll have done when I show her this! Maybe I just had to work late!”

“Then you shouldn’t have made her wait!” Abuela shouts at me, and then Abuela and I both burst out laughing before the video cuts off.

I cup my wife’s face and sigh. “Needless to say, I was going to crop that video before ever showing it to you. Can’t believe I got told off for something I hadn’t even done.”

She looks into my eyes, and for the first time in days, I see a hint of joy in hers. “I love you,” she whispers. “So much.”

I press a lingering kiss to her forehead and inhale shakily. “I love you more, Valentina.”

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Chapter Fifty-Nine

LUCA

I check my pocket watch as I walk into Abuela's house. I'm later than usual tonight, and I hope she wasn't waiting for me. Her workload has mostly fallen onto my plate, and it makes me appreciate her all the more. Without my wife and the workflows we've created, everything takes 10x longer. I've never been this overworked, stressed out, or *lonely*. Even though I see her every day, I miss her more than I ever have before.

It's been weeks, but she still barely speaks, and she's refusing to come home. I'm no longer sure if she even wants to see me. She seems entirely indifferent to me, and even though I know it's just because of her grief, it hurts. My siblings and Grandma all keep coming to see her, and with each week that passes, we're all growing increasingly worried.

It kills me to know I can't offer her consolation, and that my presence is essentially meaningless to her. It makes me wonder if I overestimated her feelings for me, and then I immediately feel like an asshole for being so selfish. I still remember how hard it was for me to lose my parents, and to Valentina, this is no different.

I pause in surprise when I find my mother-in-law sitting at the bottom of the stairs. "Mom," I murmur. Shortly after the funeral, she told me to call her *Mom*, the way Valentina does, but it still doesn't feel entirely natural to me. The sign of acceptance, however, is very welcome right now.

"Luca," she says, her voice strained. She looks up at me, her eyes brimming with unshed tears. "Please don't give up on my daughter. I was in the wrong, and I never should have kept you two apart for as long as I did. I shouldn't have assumed you'd be like Val's father, or that you'd look down on her. I know I didn't treat you well at the start, and I have no right to make such a request of you now, but I'm begging you. Please don't give up on her."

I kneel in front of her and grab her hands. "I won't," I promise. She looks so helpless and desperate that I'm at a loss for words. "What's wrong? Did Valentina say something that made you worry?"

She hesitates for a moment, and unease trickles down my spine. "You should go up," she says eventually. I nod and help her up, and she stands aside as I walk up the stairs, the steps creaking underneath my feet.

I pause in front of Valentina's bedroom, gathering my courage. It kills me to see her so listless, and every day, it takes all of me to act cheerful when watching her wither away kills me inside.

I push her door open and walk in to find her lying in bed, as usual. "Hey baby," I murmur as I pull on my tie, loosening it.

She doesn't even look up at me, and it fucking tears me apart. I just want her to smile at me the way she used to. Hell, I'll take the Ice Queen over this.

I bite down on my lip for a moment before deciding that this can't continue this way. I pull her blankets off her, exposing her barely covered body, but not even that gets her to turn around and face me. My gaze roams over her, and I take in the old ratty t-shirt she's wearing. Looks like she hasn't touched anything I brought for her from home. Why?

"Enough now, Valentina," I tell her as I reach for her. She gasps as I lift her into my arms, but her gaze remains blank.

It’s only when I carry her into the bathroom and place her in the shower that she responds. “I showered just a few hours ago,” she mutters.

I step into the shower with her and turn it on, my clothes soaking through instantly. “I know,” I murmur. The bathroom is the only place she trades her bedroom for every day, but it’s clear her visits are brief, because her hair is a knotted and greasy mess. I’ve never seen her care so little for her own well-being.

“Luca,” she says, her eyes widening as she takes in my dripping suit, her gaze roaming over me and settling on my socks.

Her wet t-shirt starts to cling to her body, exposing every one of her curves, and I sigh as I tug off my suit jacket, undressing slowly.

“Help me,” I tell her, placing her hands on my shirt.

She looks up at me, her gaze unreadable. For a moment, I think she’ll reject me and walk out, but then she starts to undo the buttons, her fingers moving slowly.

Something flashes through her eyes when my shirt falls opens, and I watch her carefully as I pull on my sleeves and take it off.

Valentina leans against the shower wall and watches me. It’s like we went back to before we got married, because once again, I have no idea what she’s thinking. Once again, I’d give the world to find out.

“Now this,” I tell her as I place her hands on my suit pants.

She hesitates for a moment, but then she helps me take that off too, not a single complaint escaping her lips as I continue to undress, until I’m standing in front of her naked.

“You don’t want me,” she murmurs, her eyes on my cock. For the first time in weeks, I see emotions flickering through her eyes, however brief it may be. *Fear. Rejection. Pain.*

I smile at her as I grab the edges of her t-shirt and pull it up. “I always want you, baby. It’s just hard for me to be turned on when you look at me like you can’t stand to be around me.”

Valentina raises her arms, and I pull her t-shirt off, leaving her standing in front of me in nothing but a pair of pink boxer shorts. My hands wrap around them, and she looks into my eyes as I push them down.

I move closer to her and cage her in, my forearms on either side of her head. “Let’s wash your hair, okay? I think you’ll feel better if we do.”

She looks up at me and places her hands on my chest. Does she realize that this is the most she’s touched me in weeks? “You want to… wash my

hair?”

I smirk and grab a strand of her hair. “You sound disappointed. Were you hoping for more?”

She looks at me, and for a moment, she grits her teeth. “It’s only been a few weeks. Are you getting your needs fulfilled elsewhere already?”

I frown, offended that she’d ask me something like that. I can’t snap at her, but she knows exactly how to push my buttons. “No. Of course not.”

I push away from her and grab her shampoo, taking my time to lather it into her hair carefully. “Turn around.”

She turns her back to me, and I work the shampoo through her hair, massaging her scalp while I’m at it. Valentina remains silent even as I wash out her shampoo and condition her hair, following Sierra’s instructions carefully.

“You can, if you want,” she says, her voice emotionless.

“What’s that?”

“If you want to sleep with someone else, you can.”

I grab her shoulders and turn her back around roughly, at the end of my rope with her. She takes a step back and leans back against the wall, her eyes filled with defiance.

Even now, as she’s breaking my heart, she looks fucking breathtaking, and I fucking hate it. I will never be immune to her. “What did you just say to me?” I ask, my voice soft.

“You heard me just fine, Luca.”

I run a hand through my hair and stare up at the ceiling for a moment, fighting for patience before deciding that it’s a losing battle. I push her flush against the wall, my body against hers and my hand in her hair as I tilt her head toward mine.

“Read my fucking lips, Valentina Windsor,” I snap, my tone threatening. “I will never want anyone but you. For as long as I live, the only woman I’ll sleep with is you. *Only you*. No one else. I love *you*, Valentina.”

I see hope sparkle in her eyes, and that’s all I need. Just one sign to tell me she still loves me the same. I’ll hold on for the both of us. I’ll love her harder to compensate for the pain she’s feeling.

She looks away, and I sigh as I take a step back and grab her soap. How could I have lost my patience with her? I should’ve known better. “What is it that’s going on in that pretty mind of yours?” I ask, my tone far more patient as I run my soapy hands over her body.

Her breath hitches as I cup her breasts, my thumbs brushing over her nipples. They harden for me beautifully, and she looks up at me with equal parts desire and defiance.

“I saw the photos,” she tells me, her tone accusatory.

I frown in confusion as I continue to tease her, my cock hardening rapidly. “Which photos?”

“Of you and Jessica.”

My hands dip lower, and I watch her closely as her breathing turns ragged. She’s accusing me of something that’s entirely in her head, but I’d rather have that than her indifference. What she saw was probably a photo of me meeting with Jessica and her team. At no point have I been alone with her, but the press would’ve made it look that way. The Herald has been trying to find out more about Valentina and me ever since the company memo went out, but our security is tight. We aren’t public figures in the way Ares and Raven are, so there isn’t much for them to report on.

“Baby,” I murmur as my hands slide over her thighs. “Just who do you think is doing your job right now? I’m handling the acquisition on your behalf.”

She frowns at me, and I chuckle as my fingers slip between her legs. Her clit is already swollen for me, and I groan when pure desire fills her eyes as I brush over it.

Valentina arches her back for me, silently asking for more. It’s been so long since I saw her look at me that way.

“This pussy,” I murmur, “is the only one I’ll ever want.” I push two fingers into her, and her pussy clamps down on it hard. She’s so fucking tight… if I fuck her now, it’ll be like the first time I took her. She’ll struggle to take all of me, but now that I’ve got her looking at me like that, part of me wants to torment her. I want to see her eyes flash with need.

I pump my fingers into her and curl them, hitting her right where I know she’s weakest. “Luca,” she moans, and it’s fucking music to my ears. It’s been way too fucking long.

Her arms wrap around my neck, and she arches her back for me in a silent plea for more. I don’t think I’ve ever been this consumed with need before. I think I might go crazy if I don’t take her now.

My lips come crashing down on hers, and relief surges through me when she rises to her tiptoes and kisses me back.

“Fuck,” I moan against her mouth. “I’ve missed you so fucking much.”

Her fingers thread through my hair, and I pull away a little to look at her, needing a stronger connection. It’s crazy how deep my need for her goes. It’s more than her body I want.

“Look at me,” I order, and she obeys, her gaze filled with desire and insecurity. “I love you, Valentina Windsor.”

She looks into my eyes as I play with her pussy, teasing her, tormenting her. Not once does she look away as I push her toward an orgasm. I’ll never get enough of her.

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Chapter Sixty

VALENTINA

Luca holds me in his arms in bed, our bare skin touching. It's been so long since I've felt this way. For a few moments, he made me feel alive again.

I was so sure he'd want sex after he made me come, but he just pulled away and proceeded to comb my hair, until it was completely untangled. I'm not sure what to make of it. Even now, I can feel how hard he still is, yet all he did when we got out of the shower was blow-dry my hair and carry me to bed.

I hate how insecure I feel, how hard it is to control my thoughts, even when I'm well aware that they're irrational. It's like I'm caught in a downward spiral, and my own brain has turned against me, fueling every single one of my negative emotions.

If I’m not thinking about Abuela and the way I neglected and failed her, I’m thinking about Luca, and how incompatible we are. Abuela once asked me to think about what makes me happy, and to chase whatever that is… but I still don’t know what true happiness is. Is any of this even real? How long will it take for Luca to tire of me?

Now that I’m not at work, is he slowly realizing that he doesn’t need me? I’m scared to lose him, but at the same time I can’t help but push him away even further. No matter what I do, I keep feeling like he’s better off without me. I keep trying to convince myself it isn’t true, but I know he’ll leave me eventually. It’s only a matter of time. Everyone always leaves.

“Valentina,” he murmurs, pulling me closer. I look up to find him staring at me, his expression torn. Fear rushes through me, and all of a sudden, I’m certain this is it. He’s going to tell me that he’s done with me, that this is too much hard work. Or worse, that he’s found someone else.

“Let’s—” I cut him off and kiss him, not wanting to hear it. Just a little longer. For just a while longer, I want to exist in this world where Luca loves me. I don’t want the illusion to shatter just yet.

He groans and threads a hand through my hair, his grip tight. Normally, he’d already have pulled me underneath him, but tonight he just kisses me tenderly. It’s almost like he’s just indulging me, like he doesn’t want me the way he used to.

My hand slips down his chest and over his abs, and he inhales sharply when I grab his cock. “*Valentina*,” he says, his tone chastising.

“Ssh,” I hush him, my eyes on his as I pump up and down. He’s rock hard and throbbing in my hands. Normally, he’d already have pushed my legs apart and told me he’d go crazy if he didn’t get to fuck me right away. Tonight, he just stares at me, unmoving, his entire body tense.

I push against his chest, and he falls onto his back with a grunt. “What are you doing?” he asks, his tone uncertain. I’ve never felt this lonely before. My heart has never felt quite this empty. I wish I knew what I was doing, but I don’t. All I know is that I need something from him. I just don’t know what it is.

I sit down on my knees and lean over, my hand wrapped around the base of his cock. He moans, and for a moment, I feel wanted. My eyes never leave his as I bend over and place his cock against my lips. Luca looks tormented, yet he isn’t losing control with me.

I watch him closely as the tip of his cock slips into my mouth, my tongue twirling over every sensitive part. I suck down hard, wishing he'd just thrust into my mouth, forcing me to take it deeper. I want him to treat me the way he used to, like he could barely control his need.

Luca's hand trembles as he reaches for me. "Baby," he murmurs. "I'm about three seconds away from coming already. I don't think I can take this tonight."

Pain tears through my heart, and I take him in deeper. He's rejecting me and using a convenient excuse. I know what Luca is like. He can go for hours if I ask him to.

My head bobs up and down on his cock, and he moans my name like it's a prayer. "Valentina," he groans. "Please, my love."

His cock hits the back of my throat, and finally, his hand wraps into my hair. He grips tightly as his hips begin to move, and relief washes over me. Just as his cock begins to pulse, I pull away.

"*No*," he groans, his gaze distressed.

I smile at him, my heart much more at ease as I climb on top of him. He's breathing hard as his hands wrap around my hips, his eyes on my pussy. I grab his cock and align it before slowly sinking down on it.

"So fucking tight," he moans. "Your pussy is perfection, baby. Sucking me off made you wet, huh?"

A soft moan escapes my lips as I sit down on him fully, taking all of him. It's been so long, and the way he's stretching me out is unreal. He tightens his grip on my hips, but he doesn't move me up and down the way he used to. Instead, he leans back and watches me patiently.

This isn't what I want. I don't want him to indulge me. I don't want him to give into me just to fulfill my needs. I want him to act as passionate and out of control as he used to.

I slowly begin to ride him, and he gently moves his hips with me, meeting me thrust for thrust and fucking me deeply. He looks into my eyes as he places his thumb against my clit, making it so that I brush against it with every move.

I wanted to make him lose control, yet he's the one who's making me lose my sanity. I don't want it like this. I don't want him to focus on my pleasure like his own doesn't matter. I need the old Luca, the one who was impatient with me because my touch drove him crazy. When he's like this, it just makes me more scared. I'm terrified that I'm losing him, and this is

just more proof of it. I want him to ease all of my irrational thoughts, every insecurity, every voice in my head that tells me I'm not good enough.

"I'm close, baby," he whispers as his fingers turn rougher. He's going to make me come again if he keeps that up, and I don't want to lose control before he does.

I bite down on my lip and ride him harder, but with every move, his touch becomes more intense. He moans my name and finally starts to thrust into me the way I wanted him to, pushing me over the edge.

Luca wraps his forearm over his mouth and bites down on it when my pussy clamps down on his cock, an orgasm stronger than the one in the shower coursing through me. His eyes fall closed, and he comes right along with me.

"Fuck, baby," he moans as his lashes flutter. "I fucking love you."

I stare at him, my heart empty. "Let's end this," I whisper.

He opens his eyes and frowns, his hands wrapping around my waist. "End what?"

"This. Us." I feel numb as I say the words. There's a slight ache in my heart, but mostly, I feel despondent. Deep down, I know that this is inevitable, and I no longer want to drag it out. "I'm tired of being with you. I'm tired of feeling so insecure and inadequate, and I don't want to have to worry about how much longer this will last. Besides, none of this is real, and you know it. I don't want to live under your rule anymore. I want real happiness, and you'll never be able to give me that, Luca. From the very start, I was just a tool to you, and I'm done wondering what will happen to me when I outlive my usefulness."

He stares at me in shock, pure pain and torment flashing through his eyes. Luca inhales shakily and covers his face with his arm, hiding himself from me. He's silent for a moment, and I shift slightly on top of him. I can still feel him inside me, but somehow, I'm too scared to move off him. It feels like everything between us truly will shatter if I do.

"You… Valentina…" He pulls his arm away, and the look in his eyes guts me. I've never seen him look so hurt before. "You're unhappy in our marriage?" He turns his head and looks away. "All this time, have you just felt trapped?"

Luca shakes his head when I lower my head and stay silent, unsure what to say. One part of myself is begging me not to do this, while another part is telling me it's inevitable, and it's better to push him away now instead of

dragging this out. Even if he thinks he loves me, it's fleeting, and ultimately, he should find a woman that actually deserves him. That will never be me.

He gently lifts me off him before sitting up, his back toward me as he sits at the edge of my bed. Luca buries his face in his hands and inhales shakily. "*Let's go home,*" he murmurs. "That's what I was going to tell you earlier… but home for you was never with me, was it? I always said that the one thing I could never do was let you go, but what right do I have to hold on when I'm suffocating you?"

He rises from my bed and reaches for his weekend bag. I sit on my knees and watch him as he gets dressed, my heart bleeding. Part of me is screaming for me to take my words back, but I can't stop this spiral, not even when regret sets in instantly.

He turns toward me as he buttons up his shirt. "I thought you were different," he murmurs. "I've never met a woman who wanted me for who I am, but I thought you did, Valentina. I guess I was wrong." He laughs humorlessly and shakes his head. "I love you," he says, but his tone is harsh. "I fucking love you with all I've got, yet you sit there, making my worst fears come true like I'm fucking nothing to you. The reason you married me is gone, so you're cutting me loose?"

He looks at me then, helplessness marring his handsome face. "I'm trying my hardest to remind myself that this is just your grief talking, but you're breaking my fucking heart, baby. What am I supposed to do here? What am I supposed to say?"

His eyes fall closed for a moment, and he takes a deep breath. "Tell me you didn't mean what you just said. Tell me you love me, and that our marriage wasn't just a means to an end for you."

I look down at my hands, my entire body numb. Deep down, I can feel a small part of me pleading for me to speak up, to not let him go, but darkness drowns out that voice. It would only take him a few months to get over me. I'm sure of it.

"Valentina, if this is what you call love, I don't want it."

He zips up his bag and turns his back to me. I watch as he walks out of my bedroom, leaving me here alone for the first night since I lost Abuela.

It hurts, but I know it's for the best.

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Chapter Sixty-One

LUCA

I stare at my wedding ring as I lean back against my sofa, the house empty and quiet. When did this place start feeling incomplete without Valentina? Just being here hurts, because everything reminds me of her. I can't even go to the office without thinking of her. She's infiltrated my life so deeply that I can't go anywhere without thinking of her.

I sigh as I reach for my pocket watch and stare at the photo of her inside it. She hasn't contacted me at all, and I have no idea what to do. I can't tell if it's just her grief that's making her act up, or if it's more. The feelings she had for me, were they truly that superficial, that fleeting?

Part of me wants to go running back to her, but another part of me feels like that would just be harassment. I've already asked so much of her, and in the last few weeks, she's made it quite clear that she doesn't want me

around. How much longer can I force my presence on her? I stayed by her side week after week, even when she barely acknowledged me. Should I have taken the hint sooner?

I should've known that even she wouldn't want me once I'm no longer of use to her. Without her grandmother and the care I provided for her, she no longer needs me. My eyes fall closed as I plead with myself to snap out of it. "This is Valentina," I whisper to myself. "You know her better than she knows herself right now. This isn't her."

I know that it's true, and that I should go back to her mother's house and endure the pain, but I'm scared that if I do, I'll have to admit that things truly are over for us. When I'm here, I'm in limbo, able to pretend everything is fine. If I go there and face her, she might truly break my heart, and I don't think I'm ready for that.

If I'm honest with myself, part of me genuinely believed that staying away for a couple of days would make her realize what kind of damage she's doing to us. I thought she'd come back home, but I should've known better. Maybe I should believe her words and accept that the woman I love more than life itself… doesn't love me back.

I sit up when I hear the sound of the front door closing, my heart racing wildly. "*Please*," I whisper, barely holding onto my sanity. Please let it be her.

My heart sinks when my grandmother walks into my living room, five bodyguards behind her. I sigh as I sink back into the sofa, feeling lost. I don't have the energy to wonder what she's doing here.

"Luca," Grandma says as she walks up to me.

I raise my face to look at her, but I don't have it in me to fake it for her. I'm fucking heartbroken, and I miss my wife.

She sighs, and for a moment, I see hesitation in her expression, but then she steels her spine. "It's come to my attention that Val and you are in breach of your agreement with me," she says, her tone firm. "Val moved out weeks ago, and you haven't been with her in over two weeks. The agreement was a maximum of three consecutive days, Luca. I'm sorry, but I'm cutting you off. All of your assets at The Windsor Bank have been frozen, and you're no longer allowed to set foot on any of the Windsor properties, including this estate. That, of course, includes the houses of all your siblings."

I stare at my grandmother in disbelief. “You’re kidding me, right? My wife isn’t home because she just lost a family member, and you know it.”

Grandma nods and smiles humorlessly. “I didn’t say she had to be *here* with you. I said you two have to be together, and you’re not. If she’s grieving at her mother’s house, then that’s where you should’ve been too. I won’t make exceptions for you, Luca. You already went behind my back and married her, and I let it go then. I won’t give you any further chances.”

She nods at one of her bodyguards, and he drops a bag onto my coffee table.

“You have ten minutes to pack your essentials before these men escort you out. I’ll let you take one of your cars, but you’re forbidden from selling it, since it’s Windsor property.”

I stare at her in disbelief. “How could you do this to me, all because I disobeyed one of your ridiculous rules? Is total obedience truly more important to you than my happiness and well-being?” I run a hand through my hair and chuckle humorlessly when she stares at me completely expressionlessly. “You’re making an example of me to ensure my siblings stay in line, huh? Do you truly think Mom and Dad would want this for me? How are you going to live with the knowledge that you’re letting them down in the worst way?”

She sighs. “Eight minutes,” she informs me, completely fucking heartless.

I rise to my feet, fueled by hatred. “I hope something as ridiculous as this is worth losing your grandson over, because I’ll never come back to this damn estate. For the rest of your life, you won’t see me again. I’m done being one of your little puppets.”

“Five minutes,” she replies, a sweet smile on her face. How can she look at me that way, entirely unaffected? Does she even love my siblings and me at all, or are we just tools for her to expand her legacy with?

I sigh as I gather my most precious belongings and a handful of clothes. How did I lose everything in a matter of days? Where did it all go wrong?

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Chapter Sixty-Two

VALENTINA

My bedroom door opens, and hope rushes through me, only for it to vanish the second I see Sierra and Raven. I shouldn't expect Luca to come back here after the way I pushed him away, but somehow, a small irrational part of me wants him to fight for me even when I make it so hard. It's unfair, and I don't want to think or act this way, but it's like I'm helpless in the face of fear.

The girls smile at me as they sit down on my bed. "How are you feeling?" Sierra asks, while Raven grabs my hand.

I nod. "I'm fine."

Raven squeezes my hand and shakes her head. "You're not fine at all, Val. You haven't been yourself in weeks now. I'm really worried about you. We all are."

I glance past her to find Ares, Zane, Dion, and Lexington hovering by the door. “What are you all doing here?” I ask, confused. They’ve been taking it in turns lately, each of them coming to see me every few days, but they’ve never come here all at once, together.

Sierra brushes my hair behind my ear gently. “It’s meant to be poker night tonight, and the boys thought they’d find Luca here.”

I frown in confusion. “What do you mean? Isn’t he at home?”

Ares walks into my bedroom, his expression carefully guarded. “Grandma threw him out a few days ago because you two failed to abide by the rules. She forbade him from setting foot on Windsor property, so we haven’t seen him since. Didn’t you receive an email informing you that Grandma is firing you?”

My eyes widen as realization sinks in. We’re only allowed to be away from each other for three consecutive days at most. How could I have forgotten? Have I truly been so self-absorbed that I put everything Luca has worked for at risk?

“Where is he?”

Ares shakes his head. “I don’t know. I thought he was here.”

Lexington grabs his phone, his expression conveying concern. “I’m calling Silas.”

Zane walks into my bedroom too, his gaze roaming over my face. “What happened, Val? It was obvious to all of us that Luca is hopelessly in love with you, and he has been for far longer than you realize. What is going on?”

Dion leans in the doorway, quiet as always, yet it feels like he’s disappointed in me. He has every right to be. I start to tremble as my thoughts clear. What have I done? I grab my blankets tightly as tears gather in my eyes. I pushed him so far away that he didn’t feel like he could come to me when he needed me the most. I always knew I didn’t deserve him, but this proves it.

“Found him,” Lex says. “He’s at The Cascade Hotel. Since he can’t enter any of our hotels, he must’ve gone to a competitor. I’ve got his room number, too.”

I nod as I slip out of my bed, and Raven smiles as she holds up a bag she’d set down next to my bed. “I have the perfect outfit for you.”

I smile, genuinely, for the first time in weeks. “Of course you do.”

The boys walk out of my room, but Dion stares at me for a moment. “I’ll drive you,” he says, before closing the door behind him.

Twenty minutes later, I’m seated in Dion’s car, wearing a red dress that Raven designed for me, my heart uneasy. Dion insisting on driving me when normally Sierra and Raven would’ve done it can mean only one thing. He wants to talk to me. Dion has always been this way. He isn’t one to speak up in public, and each real conversation I’ve ever had with him has always been in private, just the two of us.

My thoughts turn back to Luca, and I inhale shakily. What do I even say to him? How do I begin to apologize for everything I said, for the way I acted? What if he doesn’t want to see me?

“It’s going to be fine, Val. I’m not sure what’s going on between the two of you, but even to me, it’s obvious that you love my brother. It’s also clear to me that losing your grandmother led to depression for you. It’s something I’m more familiar with than I care to admit, and you need help, Val. Get help before you let this destroy yourself, and your relationship with Luca. I wish I’d asked for help when I lost my parents, but I can’t turn back time. Do what I didn’t have the courage to do, no matter how hard it might be. Luca deserves that much, doesn’t he?”

I nod, my head lowered. He’s right, of course. I can’t let this darkness claw at me any further. Not when it’s starting to touch and destroy those I love. “I’m sorry,” I whisper.

“I know you are,” Dion says, his voice soft. “You don’t need to be perfect, you know? The others don’t see it, because they’re always around you and they’ve gotten used to it, but I see it. You’re always trying so hard, like you’re scared we won’t want you around if you’re not useful to us. You overwork yourself and tear yourself apart trying to please everyone, until there’s nothing left of you. Val, you don’t need to do that. We all love you just as you are. We always have. You were family long before you married Luca, and that will never change. We don’t need you to do anything for us, and you don’t need to make yourself useful. You just need to be yourself.” He glances at me then, a soft chuckle escaping his lips when he sees the tears in my eyes.

He pulls up on the curb and opens his arms for me. “Come here,” he says, his voice soft. Dion pulls me into his arms and hugs me tightly, and just like that, I fall apart. “For the last nine years, you’ve been my baby sister, Val,” he says, his grip tight. “Just like Sierra is, and just like Raven.

Nothing will ever change that, okay? You don’t need to try so hard to be loved. You’re worthy of it just as you are, and we do, we all love you. I can see you battling demons you’ll never tell me about, so this is as much as I can do for you, sweetheart. Know that you have four big brothers and two crazy sisters who will always support you, no matter what. We’re all here for you, so stop acting like it’s you against the world, all right? Stop pushing us all away, and stop being so scared you’ll lose us. It won’t happen. I promise.”

I pull away from him, and he gently dries my tears, a hint of worry in his eyes. “Now, tell me that this is going to be our little secret, because if Luca finds out that I made his wife cry, I’m not sure I’ll live to see another day. The way my brother loves you is no joke.”

I smile through my tears and nod. It’s hard for me to believe sometimes, but Dion is right. I’m loved beyond reason, even on days that are hard.

Especially by my husband.

I’m not sure how I’ll earn his forgiveness for everything I said to him, but I see it now. This life isn’t worth living without him.

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Chapter Sixty-Three

VALENTINA

I'm trembling as I stare at Luca's hotel room door, my thoughts reeling. I don't know what to say to him, and I'm scared he doesn't want to see me. Something this significant happened, and he didn't even reach out to me. Did I push him away too far? Does he think I'm too much? Too broken. Too insecure. Far too much work.

Even now, insecurity claws at me, trying its best to convince me I'm not good enough, that there's no way I can help him, and that I'll only be a burden to him.

We don't need you to do anything for us, and you don't need to make yourself useful. You just need to be yourself.

Dion's words resound through my mind, throwing me a lifeline when self-doubt tries to drown out every positive thought. Would it truly be

enough for me to be myself? “Please,” I whisper, willing myself to be a little stronger, to fight a little harder. Luca stood by me for weeks without a single complaint. I’m not hurting any less than I was then, but how could I claim to love him if I can’t do this much? If he pushes me away and tells me he doesn’t want to see me, then I’d deserve that. But he deserves my best effort, no matter what.

I knock on his door and wait, my heart in my throat. I haven’t felt like myself in weeks, but even less so right now. It took me years to become stronger and more independent, yet here I stand, a broken person, about to face the man that built me up brick by brick.

Self-hatred, shame, and doubt nearly consume me, but my love for him keeps me standing here, even when it feels like the hardest thing I’ve ever done.

The door opens, and my heart skips a beat when I see my husband standing in front of me, his hair disheveled, and my favorite gray sweatpants hanging low on his hips, his torso bare. I’ve missed him more than I even realized, and the way he’s looking at me makes me hope he feels the same way.

“Valentina,” he murmurs, shocked. “What are you doing here?”

Nerves keep me captive, but I decide to stand my ground. I force a smile and rush past him, scared he’ll close the door on me and deprive me of a chance to say what I have to.

I turn back to face him when I hear the door fall closed, and he walks toward me hesitantly, his expression guarded. Luca’s eyes slowly roam over my body, taking in the red dress I’m wearing. For a moment, I’m certain I see pain flash through his eyes, but then he sighs and smiles at me. It’s been a really long time since I last saw him smile at me that way — it’s the smile he reserves for everyone but me. Distant. Polite. *Fake*.

“You look good,” he says, his voice soft. “It looks like you’re feeling better. I’m glad.”

He stares at me for a moment, and then he shakes his head slightly as he tears his gaze off me. Even when I told him we should end things, it didn’t feel as final as it does right now. What have I done?

I’m shaking as I walk toward him, desperation dictating my every move. I’m willing to lose every part of myself, but not if that means I lose him, too.

I pause in front of him, and Luca looks down at me, his expression unreadable. It's been so long since I stood in front of him without him instantly pulling me into his arms, and it hurts. It kills me to know that I did this to us.

"Forgive me," I whisper. My eyes fill with tears, and I ball my hands into fists, my nails digging into my skin roughly. "Please forgive me, Luca. I didn't mean a thing I said. And I—"

It only takes him a split second to pull me into his arms, and the moment he wraps me in his embrace, I burst into tears. A soft sob tears through my throat despite my best attempts to choke it back, and Luca tightens his grip on me.

"There's nothing to forgive," he tells me, his words rushed, as though he can't bear to hear me cry. "Nothing at all, baby."

I bury my face against his chest and hold on to him tightly, never wanting to let go again.

"I-I'm so s-sorry," I cry. "I wasn't thinking clearly, and all of my thoughts just kept spiraling, and it just kept getting worse. I convinced myself that you didn't truly love me and that you could never want me." My words tumble out in a rush, and I try my hardest to just *breathe*. "Then I started to think that you were better off without m-me, and maybe that's true, but Luca… I'm sorry, but I don't think I can let you go. Even if you deserve better, even if I'm not right for you, even if I've hurt you. I… I can't."

He grabs my shoulders and pulls away a little to look at me, his gaze searching. I've never seen insecurity in Luca's eyes before, but that's exactly what's staring back at me. "Even if I'm penniless? Even if I'm the reason we lost our home and our jobs?" His voice is soft, a slight tremor to it.

"Even more so then," I tell him. "I just need *you*, Luca. If anything, I felt like all of that was standing between us, like we could never be true equals because I could never measure up. I felt like I constantly had to prove myself, like you might leave me if I was no longer useful to you."

He cups my face, his gaze distressed. "How could you ever think that? I love you more than anything, Valentina. I know that I initially proposed a transactional marriage, but that's only because you wouldn't have married me any other way. I thought we agreed that we'd turn our marriage into a real one, didn't we? How could you doubt my love for you?"

I wrap my arms around his neck and blink back my tears. “You still love me?” I ask, my voice trembling.

Luca smiles at me, and my heart skips a beat. This smile. That’s the one that’s only mine. “I never stopped loving you, not even for one second. We had a couple of rough weeks, but my love for you isn’t that superficial. It was just an argument, baby. It’s a phase we’ll work through. Didn’t I tell you once that there will be seasons in our lives, some better than others? I promised you I’d be by your side through all of them, didn’t I? I never should have left.”

“When you didn’t come back, I… I thought…”

He sighs and presses a kiss to my forehead. “I was hurt, and I thought some space could be good for us. I didn’t want to risk saying something I’d regret when you were clearly in enough pain as it was. I was just giving both of us space and time, but then my grandmother evicted me and I was no longer sure what to do. I’ll be honest with you, Valentina. I was scared.”

He pulls away and runs a hand through his hair, that same insecurity I saw earlier flashing through his eyes again.

“Of what?” I whisper.

He looks at me, his gaze pleading, as though he’s quietly begging me to reassure him. “That you truly wouldn’t want me if I wasn’t a Windsor. All my life, I’ve been surrounded by women who use me for my wealth or my connections, and when you said you wanted to end things with me, I feared the worst. You no longer needed me, and I…”

“Forgive me,” I tell him, my voice breaking. “I will never make you doubt me like that again. Never. I promise, Luca. I just… I was insensitive and selfish, and in my efforts to push you away before you could leave me, I hurt you more than I thought was possible.” I pause and look up at him, hoping my sincerity is evident. “I’ve never once wanted you because you’re a Windsor, Luca. I could’ve gotten a loan from Sierra or your grandmother if I needed one, but instead, I chose to marry you. It wasn’t… it wasn’t because I needed you. It was because I *wanted* to be with you, despite everything. That has never changed. *I love you*.”

He smiles shakily and grabs a strand of my hair, mesmerized. “I love you more, Valentina Windsor.”

I look into his eyes, my heart racing. Even now, fear claws at me, but I’m going to hang onto the hope I see in his eyes. From now on, I’ll choose Luca. Over fear, insecurity, doubt — against all the odds.

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Chapter Sixty-Four

LUCA

Valentina holds my hand tightly as we walk into her mother's house. I've been here so many times now, yet it feels different this time. I feel like a fucking failure, an embarrassment. Despite that, my mother-in-law smiles when she sees me.

"You're home," she tells me, not even a hint of judgement in her gaze. Perhaps she hasn't heard about what happened yet. "Have you eaten? Come sit."

She takes us into the living room, and I sit down quietly, unsure of what to say. When Valentina told me to come home with her instead of wasting money at a hotel, it made sense, and I agreed with her. But I regret it now. I don't want to intrude, and no doubt this won't make her mother look favorably on me.

“Relax, Luca,” Mom says. “This is your home too. Technically, it’s Val’s, since she paid it off entirely all by herself. You don’t need to look so guilty. You’ll always be welcome here.”

“I… we… we won’t intrude for long,” I promise her. “It won’t take me long to find a new job.” My hand wraps around Valentina’s, and she squeezes reassuringly.

“I’m worried about you two,” she says, before glancing at my wife. “I really like you, Luca, but that wasn’t always the case. When you first got married, I was worried that you’d lead my daughter down the same path I walked. To have you sitting here, the circumstances so similar to back then… it really worries me. I know you love Val, but love often isn’t enough. The only reason I have some faith in you is because you’ve essentially already been living here for weeks, and you never seemed bothered by the things that Miguel used to despise. I’ve seen you do the dishes and tidy the house, and you always clean up after yourself too. You seem like you’ll be fine without the luxuries that have surrounded you all your life, but for how long? How long until you start to resent my daughter for everything you lost? How long until you realize how hard you’ll have to work? This is the same situation that changed the man I thought I knew.”

“Mom,” Valentina murmurs, but I squeeze her hand and shake my head.

“I understand your concerns,” I tell her. “But I have full faith that I’ll prove you wrong. From the moment I lost my parents, I’ve been asked to prove my worth. I’ve had to step up and earn everything I have. Even at work, Valentina and I both started at the bottom and worked our way up. We did that once, and we can do it again. We make for a great team, and I firmly believe there’s nothing we can’t get through together.”

My words may sound confident, but deep down, I’m worried I’ll let both of them down. The last thing I want to do is make my wife suffer. The mere thought of being unable to provide for her kills me. She needs more rest, not more worries. I want to give her time to properly grieve, yet here she is, dressed for battle on my behalf. She shouldn’t be looking for jobs right now, and I don’t want her worrying about me, but what can I do? I feel like I’m failing her, but I’m so selfish that I can’t let her go.

“We’ll be fine, Mom,” Valentina says. “I promise. Don’t worry about us, okay? Luca is nothing like Dad. You see that, don’t you?”

“I do,” she admits, and that’s enough for me. It’s all I can really ask for. The rest, I’ll have to prove to her. I’m nothing like Miguel at all. There’s a

lot to be said about my grandmother, but she ensured we didn't grow up spoiled and entitled. We all had to work hard for everything we've got, and it's equipped us with the necessary skills to make it anywhere.

Valentina holds my hand as we head up to her bedroom, everything around me feeling brand new. The door closes behind us, and I stare at her bed for a moment, my heart wrenching.

I want real happiness, and you'll never be able to give me that, Luca.

That's more true now than it was then. Did she come find me because she pitied me? Did she feel like she owed me for anything?

"Please don't do that," she whispers, and I glance at her, my heart aching. "Don't look so heartbroken, Luca."

I gently cup her face and sigh. "Now is your chance," I murmur. "If I truly don't make you happy, now is your chance to walk away. I have nothing to offer you, Valentina. I won't ever hold it against you, and I can't force you to stay. The last thing I want to do is drag you down with me."

She shakes her head and grabs my hands. "I told you, right? I'm never letting you go again, no matter how selfish it may be. I won't tell you that I'm not scared, or that I feel completely better, because that isn't true. My insecurities still plague me, and I can't guarantee I won't say something that will upset you. When things get bad, I may continue to push you away, and I may say things I don't mean. Will you allow me to hold on to you despite that? If I promise to work on being better, will you stay by my side?"

My heart skips a beat as I drop my forehead to hers. "Nothing you could do or say will ever make me leave you, Valentina. You are, without a doubt, the love of my life. You are the single best thing that has ever happened to me. When I married you, it's all versions of you I signed up for. The good, the bad, the occasional crazy. I never just wanted your very best. I want it all, baby."

Her arms wrap around me, and she hugs me tightly. "We're going to be fine, aren't we?"

"Yes," I murmur as I lean in to kiss her. "We're going to do what we do best, Valentina. We're going to fight. For us, and for the future we know we can have."

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Chapter Sixty-Five

VALENTINA

"What's wrong?" Luca asks when I walk into my bedroom, my eyes glued to my phone. He's seated at my desk and rises to his feet to meet me halfway. For a moment I hesitate, but then he holds out his hand for me and smiles. "Another rejection?"

"Yeah," I admit as I entwine our fingers, discouraged. It's been three weeks since he moved in with me, and I've lost count of the number of rejections I've gotten. Considering how qualified I am for these jobs, this should be impossible. "This reminds me of the last time I tried finding a different job," I mutter, my eyes narrowed.

Luca smiles sheepishly and cups the back of his neck. "I'm sorry," he murmurs. "You'll never let me live that down, will you? I shouldn't have

blacklisted you, baby. But what was I supposed to do? You were so set on leaving me, and you know I never could've let that happen."

I cross my arms and stare him down. "You're saying sorry, but you really don't sound very sorry at all, Luca."

He chuckles and runs a hand through his hair. "I admit that this sucks, baby. Literally no one I know is returning my calls, and all my job applications result in instant rejections. We definitely got blacklisted, and it's an awful experience. In some ways, it would've been the perfect payback for what I did to you, huh?"

I glare at him and poke him in the stomach, annoyed. "Still not an apology."

"I apologize for hurting you," he tells me, his gaze sincere. "But I won't apologize for doing everything in my power to keep you by my side. Was it a little psychotic and definitely toxic? Absolutely. Would I do it all over again? *Yes*, without a single doubt. How can I regret doing something that eventually led to you becoming my wife? Every single step we've taken in the last couple of years led us to each other. If I could go back in time, I'd still do whatever it takes to make you mine."

"You're incorrigible," I tell him.

"I'm just in love with you," he counters. "I'm irrevocably, insanely, *unconditionally*, in love with you."

"How am I supposed to stay mad at you when you say things like that?"

"You aren't, baby," he murmurs as he pulls me closer, his arms wrapping around my waist. "But if you need a little more placating, I will selflessly offer up my body for you."

I burst out laughing, and the sound surprises me. It's been so long since I laughed that way. The last couple of weeks haven't been easy, and grief still haunts me, coming in waves interspersed with self-doubt and fear. But this is what keeps me going. Luca's patience, his love.

"Pray tell," I murmur as a sly smile finds its way onto my lips. "How will you appease my anger?"

Luca chuckles and lifts me into his arms, eliciting a soft gasp from me. My legs wrap around his hips, and he pushes me against the wall. "Well, of course, I'd have to start with a kiss."

His lips brush against mine, and he kisses away my smile leisurely, slowly turning me on, until he's got me writhing against him.

"Then what?" I murmur against his lips.

He chuckles and turns us around. “Then I carry you to your bed,” he tells me as he sits me down at the edge of my bed, my feet on the floor.

“Oh yeah?” I whisper. “What for?”

Luca chuckles and pushes my dress up. “So I can take this off.” He slowly drags my panties down my legs, and I can’t help but giggle. He makes me so insanely happy, it’s unreal.

“You wanna know what comes next?” he asks as he kneels in front of my bed, between my legs.

“Yeah,” I moan as he kisses my thigh.

“Next, I get a taste of your pussy. I’ll fuck you with my tongue until you forget why you were mad at me in the first place.”

I gasp when I feel his tongue on me. He grabs my legs and drapes them over his shoulders, his hands on my hips as he does what he told me he would. Luca’s tongue brushes over my clit over and over again, and within minutes, he’s got me ready to come. There’s something about the way he touches me. No matter whether he’s being rough or patient, his touch is always filled with devotion.

“Please,” I whisper, but he chuckles and pulls away. “*Luca*!” I complain. He got me right to the edge before pulling away, leaving me needy and frustrated. “This is not an apology. It’s torture!”

He merely smirks and undoes his jeans, his eyes on mine as he takes his cock out. I don’t think I’ll ever tire of this sight. The way he looks at me, his hand wrapped around his cock, his wedding ring catching the light. It makes my heart race in a way it has never done for anyone else.

Luca grabs my legs and lifts them over his shoulder as he pushes the tip into me, slowly. “Baby,” he murmurs. “I love making you come on my tongue, but today I want this hot pussy of yours squeezing my cock tightly. There’s nothing better than coming with you.”

I lock my ankles behind his head as he thrusts all the way into me, his eyes on mine as he fucks me slowly, keeping me at a slight angle. He knows I can’t last long when he’s gotten me this close, but I’m trying my best to hold on. I want him to enjoy every second of this as much as I do.

“Your pussy is so fucking good, baby. It’s like a fucking vice. Fuck. It’s my favorite thing in the whole world.”

I giggle even as I’m overcome with passion. This is something I never even knew was possible. I didn’t think it was possible to have so much fun,

love, passion, and joy all blended together into one. I suppose that's what happiness is.

"More," I plead, and Luca's gaze morphs into something else. I love watching him lose it for me. He makes me feel so ridiculously wanted.

"Like this?" he asks as he rotates his hips a little with every thrust. He pulls out almost all the way, before thrusting into me hard, over and over again.

"Yeah," I moan. "Oh God, yeah. I can't…" I can't hold on for much longer when he takes me like that.

"Fuck, I love you," Luca groans, and I bite down on my lip harshly as a powerful orgasm washes over me in waves. He moans and takes me harder, coming seconds after I do. "I really fucking love you."

I smile at him as I squeeze my inner muscles, enjoying the way he groans each time I do it. "I love you more," I tell him. I didn't even think I was capable of loving anyone the way I love him. He broke the mold and set a new precedent. He showed me what true happiness is, and for the rest of our lives, I'm going to do what I can to make sure he always feels the same way.

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Chapter Sixty-Six

VALENTINA

"Where are we going?" I ask, confused. We've been driving for over an hour, and the roads only seem to look less and less familiar.

"It's a surprise," Luca tells me. His voice has a slight tremor to it, and I can't help but study him carefully. He's hiding something from me, and I'm not sure why. Is he trying to surprise me with a date? We haven't gone on one since we lost our jobs. I still have plenty of my savings left, but we have no choice but to be a bit prudent these days. Besides, neither of us is the type to relax when there's so much to worry about.

Luca pulls up on the side of a dirt road and turns toward me. Is he… is he trembling? "Please wear this," he says, holding up one of his ties.

I frown in confusion, and he reaches for me, his hands shaking as he covers my eyes with it. "*Oh*. A blindfold? Seriously, Luca. What is going

on?”

He doesn’t answer and gets out of the car instead. He’s acting so weird tonight, and I’m not sure what to make of it. Our routines have become incredibly predictable lately. We spend our days applying for jobs and helping Mom around the house, and we spend our evenings talking and enjoying each other. It’s a simple life, but it’s far more enjoyable than I thought it would be. Tonight is a strange deviation from the norm.

“Careful,” Luca says as he wraps an arm around me. “It’s a bit of a walk. We’ll go slow, okay?”

“You know I’m not the type to like surprises,” I murmur. I’m too much of a control freak, and I hate not being in the loop. He definitely caught me off guard tonight.

“I’m very much hoping that you’ll like this one,” he tells me, his tone uncertain. “I’m going to lift you up for a moment. Hold on to me?”

“*Lift me—*” I yelp when I’m lifted into the air and placed into something that feels an awful lot like a boat. He pulls my blindfold away just before he pushes off the shore, and I stare around in shock. We’re at the lake where my tree is. I can see it in the distance, all lit up with countless fairy lights, but that isn’t what’s most shocking. There are hundreds of lanterns in the water. Each with a pink sticky note stuck to it — all of them ones *I’ve* written throughout the years.

Luca smiles at me nervously, his gaze filled with emotions I can’t quite describe. This is more than just love. It’s reverence.

“How?” I whisper. “Why… why would these… how come…”

“I collected them,” he tells me, his voice shaky. “For years, I collected each nice note you wrote me. Granted, more often than not, you wrote me veiled insults, but over the last nine years, you’ve written me over a hundred nice ones. I guess some of them may not sound nice, but every single note here made me smile. The ones at the start of the lake right here, those are simple ones from when we first started working together. Some simply read *Hope you have a great day*, or *Congratulations on signing that deal*. Others are a bit more personal, a bit sweeter. As the years passed, your tone changed.” He points at one that reads *It’s an honor to work with you.* I remember writing that after he covered for me when I made a huge mistake at work.

“And these,” he tells me as he stops paddling when we’re in the middle of the lake. “These were written when I was starting to realize that I was

falling for you, but I couldn't really admit it to myself or you."

He points towards some of the lanterns around the boat, and I chuckle. "I guess I was becoming a little more comfortable with you," I murmur as I glance around me, at the passive aggressive notes near me.

Would it kill you to smile at our new staff every once in a while?

You're the boss. Drinking that much isn't going to get you out of work. Suck it up and get over the hangover.

If you keep asking me for coffee, I can't guarantee what will be in it. This is the last one you get today.

I burst out laughing and shake my head. "Was I really so brash?" Then I pause, the smile melting off my face. "Wait," I whisper. "Luca, I wrote these two years ago."

He looks at me then, his gaze vulnerable. "Yeah," he murmurs. "You did."

He continues to paddle until we're closer to the tree, its leaves hanging above us. This entire scene is truly magical, and I can't believe he did this for me.

"These are my favorite," he tells me as he points around.

I love you. Signed, Mrs. Windsor

Your office is right next to mine, but I miss you so much

I have a surprise for you after your meeting, come find me

Utility closet? Me + you? 3pm

I deserve a reward for closing that deal, husband. How about 200 kisses?

He grabs my hand and lifts it to his lips. The way he looks at me makes my heart race in a way it never has before. "This, right here, portrays the journey of our relationship. I didn't really think much of it back then, but I must have felt something for you back when I first started collecting these sticky notes of yours, six years ago. When my grandmother told me to pack my belongings before throwing me out, my box with notes was the first thing I grabbed. You have no idea how many times I've reached for these throughout the years. You never realized it, but you've been silently encouraging me all along. Without you, I wouldn't be me. You are the foundation of everything I am, everything I'll ever be."

Luca lets go of my hand then, and the butterflies in my stomach flutter when he reaches for his pocket and takes out a Laurier ring box. He carefully lowers himself down onto one knee, keeping the boat as still as he

can. “This,” he tells me as he snaps the box open, “was the second thing I grabbed.”

I stare in shock at the stunning oval engagement ring. This can’t be happening. “But… we’re already married,” I murmur stupidly.

Luca chuckles and grabs my hand. “I know we are, but I don’t want you to miss out on anything that you should have had. When I packed this ring, we’d just had our argument, and I’d been wondering whether I made a mistake when I forced you into this marriage. Despite that, even then, I knew I could never let you go. You are the love of my life, and I will never stop fighting for you, *for us*. I know that I’m not worthy of you, Valentina, but you truly are the light in my life. You brighten up my darkest days, and you give me purpose when everything feels hopeless. At the core of all that I am, there is you. Until I breathe my last breath, that will be true.”

He takes the ring out of the box and holds it up. “If you let me, I will do everything in my power to make you smile every single day. I’ll carry your burdens like they are my own, and I’ll stand by you no matter what we face. I’ll supply you with an endless stack of pink sticky notes, and I’ll even throw in some pink gel pens.”

I laugh then, and he smiles at me, his eyes twinkling.

“For the rest of our lives, will you let me be the man that gets to call you his? Will you let me be the one you lean on, the one that gets to love you? Valentina, will you marry me?”

I nod, tears in my eyes. “Yes, Luca. *Yes*.”

He breathes a sigh of relief, as though he genuinely thought there might have been a chance I’d say no, and I can’t help but laugh through my tears. Luca slides the engagement ring onto my finger, until it’s flush with my wedding ring, and then he reaches for me. His hand wraps around the back of my neck as he pulls me in close. “Thank you,” he whispers against my lips. “For choosing me, even now.”

I drop my forehead to his and inhale shakily. “I will always choose you, Luca. Over and over again, no matter the trials or tribulations we face. You are, and always will be, the one for me. I love you more than you’ll ever know.”

His lips brush against mine, and my breath hitches. “I love you more,” he whispers.

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Chapter Sixty-Seven

LUCA

Valentina stares at her engagement ring and holds it up to the light, watching the diamond shimmer. A soft giggle escapes her lips, and my heart skips a beat. It's been a few days since I proposed to her, and she still isn't over her ring. I'm so glad I ended up proposing to her. She deserves every bit of happiness I can grant her — I just wish there was more I could do, more I could give her.

Being with her in this way takes away every single doubt I've ever had, but I'd rather live with my fears for the rest of my life if it means showering her with everything her heart desires. This isn't the life I want her to have. Because of me, she lost the job she fought so hard for. She's being shunned by the industry she rose to the top of on her own merits, purely because she's my wife. Is it truly okay to ask this much of her?

“Luca,” she says, her hands sliding up my chest and around the back of my neck. “What are you thinking about so hard?”

Her expression conveys concern, and I hate that. She doesn’t smile as much as she used to, and though I know that it’s partially because of the grief she still carries, it’s also because of me. Valentina won’t admit it, but I know she’s growing increasingly concerned about our future. She knows as well as I do that a Windsor *Kiss of Death* means we won’t be able to find jobs in our industry. No one will risk offending my grandmother.

“There’s something I need to tell you,” I say carefully, my arms wrapping around her.

Valentina leans back in my embrace, her gaze curious. She looks at me with such utter faith, and nothing scares me more than letting her down.

“I received a job offer from a company in Canada. I’m not sure we can escape my grandmother’s influence if we stay here, you know? I have no doubt she’ll tire of this eventually, and I don’t think she’ll punish us forever, but we also can’t keep living with this kind of uncertainty.”

Valentina nods, her gaze icy and calculating, and oh so fucking sexy. It’s been a while since I saw her look so cunning. “Take it,” she tells me. “Moving will be expensive, but if there’s anything I know about us, it’s that we can make it anywhere. We’ve done it before, Luca. We’ll do it again. I love your grandmother dearly, even now that she won’t speak to me, but I won’t sit back and let her ruin everything we’ve worked for. Let’s salvage what we can, and let’s focus on our own happiness.”

I nod and cup her face gently. From what I understand, Raven and Sierra have been distant recently, both no doubt barred from extending their help to us. Valentina tried hiding it from me, but I know she’s gone to my grandmother’s house a few times, only to be denied access. I never expected my grandmother to take things this far, and I’m hurt on Valentina’s behalf.

I understand punishing me, not only for going behind her back and marrying Valentina, but then breaking the agreement she offered me too. I’m fine facing those consequences, but she should have left my wife out of it. I’m not sure I can forgive her for the pain she caused.

Valentina takes a step back and rummages through her wardrobe. “If we have to, we could always sell this.” She opens up a jewelry box, and my eyes widen.

“Valentina, where did you get that?”

She stares down at the ruby encrusted jewelry set in her hands, her gaze bittersweet. “Your grandmother gave it to me for my birthday.”

“When?” I ask, my voice soft, despite my urgent tone.

She frowns. “It was shortly after Ares’s wedding. You and I weren’t on speaking terms, and I hadn’t come over for family dinner in a while. She must’ve known I was here instead of at my apartment, because she showed up and said she’d been craving Abuela’s food. We had dinner together, the four of us, and she gave me this as a belated birthday gift. She told me that she missed me, and that there would always be a place for me at her table.” Her face contorts in pain then, and she looks away. “I guess that wasn’t true, in the end.”

I take the jewelry box from her and stare at the diamonds and rubies in the heirloom necklace that has somehow found its way into my wife’s hands, exactly where it should be. I put it down on her desk carefully and reach for my pocket, unable to keep my hands from trembling.

“Look,” I murmur as I grab my wallet and take out an old, faded photo of my mother. I hand it to Valentina carefully, and her eyes widen.

“This... this… shouldn’t this be in your pocket watch?” she asks, confused. She looks a little closer, and her eyes widen. “My necklace. Your mother is wearing it in this photo.”

I nod at her and gently push her hair out of her face. “This is the necklace my grandmother gave my mother when she married into the family. It’s a sign of acceptance, but it’s only meant for daughters-in-law. I know Raven received a similar heirloom piece when she married Ares, but… it was *after* they got married. Why would she give you something this significant when shortly after, she forced me to get engaged to Natalia?”

Valentina stares at me, her eyes mirroring my confusion. “That can’t be true,” she whispers.

Grandma… what is she playing at? She’s a master strategist, and increasingly, I’m starting to feel like Valentina and I are caught in a web of her making.

“Hey,” my wife whispers. “If this photo is in your wallet… what is in your pocket watch?”

I look away awkwardly, and Valentina narrows her eyes as she reaches into my pocket. Her eyes widen when she opens my watch, and she looks up at me with so much love in her eyes that she nearly brings me to her knees.

“I remember this day,” she tells me. “We were about to go to the Kennedy charity ball, and you asked if you could take a photo of me. Why is it in here? What about your mom?”

I cup her face and smile at her. “This pocket watch used to be my dad’s. He always told me that he’d give it to me when I got married, and at that point, I should replace the photo inside with one of my own wife. He told me that every time I’d check the time, I’d be reminded what I’m doing it all for, and every time, I’d have to assess whether my time would be better spent at home or at work. He said it kept him grounded and reminded him of what was most important in a world that was becoming increasingly noisier. He was right, you know? Every time I check the time, I think of you, and it changed everything for me. It reminds me that nothing is more important than you are. You’re my family now, Valentina, and you come first. You always will.”

“I don’t know what I’ve done to deserve you,” she tells me, “but I’m so grateful to be your wife. I love you, Luca. I know you’ve been discouraged lately, and I know you’re disappointed, but I promise you that we’ll be fine. I have faith in what we can accomplish together, and I hope you do too. I don’t mind rebuilding brick by brick, so long as I’ve got you. I’d do it a thousand times over if it means I get to be with you. Nothing matters more than you do, Luca. Not my career. Not money. Certainly not prestige. I just need you. Only you.”

I stare at her and nod, my uneasy heart put to rest. She’s right, of course. She and I can make it anywhere. I just wish our love hadn’t cost us so much. All I want to do is provide for her and make her happy, and I feel like I’m letting her down.

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Chapter Sixty-Eight

LUCA

“Please call me when you land,” my mother-in-law says, her gaze filled with concern. She’s been nothing but supportive in the last couple of weeks, and I can’t help but wonder if seeing Valentina and I persevere helped her heal some of her own wounds. It certainly seems that way. She no longer seems scared that I’ll hurt or abandon Valentina, and my wife also seems much more at ease. I never realized how much distance there still was between us, but she’s right. There was a sense of inequality between us, in part because I held more leverage than she did, and in part because our marriage was built on contractual terms that felt forced.

In some ways, we chose each other, but in other ways, we never would’ve known if we’d be together if not for the circumstances that led to our marriage. Everything we’ve been through in recent weeks has become a

silver lining that I'll always be grateful for. Knowing that my wife wants to be with me despite me being penniless, despite the undoubtedly rough times we're about to face… that truly is priceless, and it has added a layer of intimacy between us that wasn't there before. There is not even a hint of reluctance or blame in her demeanor. She truly is in this with me, every step of the way.

"*Luca*," Valentina says, her tone urgent. "My app says that our flight is on final call. How is that possible? I thought we still had an hour left. What are we going to do?"

I grin at her and grab her hand. "We run."

We both kiss her mother goodbye, and then we make a run for it, hand in hand. My wife giggles as we rush through the security queues with our flight status as an excuse, and that smile doesn't leave her lips all the way to the gate. "We said we wanted new adventures and new experiences," she tells me, her eyes twinkling. "This is one of my favorites so far. Luca Windsor running for a flight. If I hadn't been running right alongside you, I'd say it's karma for all the times I've had to run across the tarmac at the Windsor airfield in heels, because you needed some document or the other."

I smile at her sheepishly as I lift our joined hands to my lips. "I'll make you a deal," I tell her. "For the rest of our lives, I'll let you punish me for the things I've put you through, okay? I hear corporal punishment is all the rage these days. Something to look into, perhaps?"

She giggles and shakes her head. "Isn't being married to me punishment enough?" she asks as the flight attendant scans our boarding passes.

"No," I tell her seriously. "It's the greatest blessing and my greatest honor."

We walk onto the plane together, only to pause at the entrance, both of us freezing. "What the fuck," I mutter as realization sinks in. This is *not* a commercial plane. It's the Windsor private jet, and it's filled with faces I didn't expect to see.

"Luca," my grandmother says, "Val." She smiles in that way she does, undecipherable.

I stare around in shock when my brothers, Sierra, Raven, Faye, Silas, and Alanna all rise to their feet. "You made it," Lex says, holding up his phone. He turns it toward me to show me the code that's flashing on his screen. "I was getting tired of waiting. Maybe *Last Call* was a bit much, though. Did you guys run?"

Grandma clears her throat and looks at me with remorse in her eyes. “Luca, do you think that you can find it in your heart to forgive this meddlesome old woman? Val’s condition continued to worsen after her grandmother passed away, and doubt continued to creep in for you too. When you came home without Val and barely left your house for days on end, I felt like I had to intervene. I witnessed the way she was withering away, and I’d hoped she’d snap out of it, but as the weeks passed, the distance between you grew. Val needed something to live for, something to fight for. You both did.”

She looks away then. “I saw an opportunity to give the both of you a fresh start, and I took it. It was because of me and my manipulation that the two of you got married with so much standing between you, so I felt it was only right that I remedy my errors. I did what I could to take away the conditions that led to your marriage, so you would have an opportunity to choose each other, the way it always should have been.”

Valentina and I look at each other as all the puzzle pieces fall into place. “You played us,” I murmur, anger and relief warring for dominance.

“Right from the very start,” Valentina adds, her tone conveying her disbelief.

“When did this start?” I ask, my voice eerily calm.

Grandma hesitates, and then she grabs a photo from her purse. She hands it to me, and Valentina and I stare at it in surprise. “That’s the two of you, days after Valentina was born,” she explains as we take in the photo of me at age five with a baby in my arms. I look terrified but enamored, and Valentina looks tiny. “Luca, your mom and dad had gone to visit Val’s parents, and they’d taken you with them. You were positively smitten with her, and they’d joked then that they should arrange a marriage between the two of you. After all, Val is technically a Garcia, and your fathers were friends.”

Valentina tenses, and I tighten my grip on her. I couldn’t have kept our fathers’ friendship from her forever, but I wish I could have.

“It started off as a joke, but in the years after, your mother kept bringing it up. She adored Val, and she always joked she’d love to have another daughter, but since that wasn’t an option, she’d just have to make Val her daughter-in-law. It was nothing formal in the slightest, and at most, it was a few comments in passing here and there, but it stuck with me as something your mother wanted for you.”

She looks away then, sorrow overtaking her expression. “When we lost your parents, I also lost track of Val, until she applied for a job with us. I reached out to Val’s mother to ask if she’d consider an arranged marriage, but she vehemently opposed and told me that she’d make Val quit her job if I so much as mentioned it again. She didn’t even want Val working for us and wanted nothing to do with our family. I have no doubt that if Val had other job offers, she’d have asked her to work somewhere else. There was nothing I could do, and I figured that if you two were meant to be, as your mother seemed to think, then something would develop between you naturally. I waited for years, yet nothing happened. Even worse, Val stopped coming home for dinner at some point… so I took a risk, hoping everything would turn out the way I thought it would.”

I wrap my hand around Valentina’s waist, neither of us able to look away from the photo Grandma gave us. “You forced an engagement with the Ivanovs,” I murmur. “I’d either break it off because of Valentina, or I’d marry Natalia and we’d gain a strong ally. It was a win-win situation for you.”

“It was,” Grandma admits. “But I didn’t anticipate that the past would haunt you the way it did, and I should’ve known my meddling would result in the clashing of both your strong personalities. I noticed it whenever I saw you two together. You loved each other, and that love continued to grow throughout your marriage, but there were some insurmountable boundaries between you. When you’ve lived as long as I have, it becomes a little easier to spot the wounds people carry. You both don’t realize it, but you carried yours on your sleeve. I know you don’t believe me, but I just wanted you to be happy.”

I glance at my siblings. “And you guys? Were you all in on this?”

Grandma places a hand on my shoulder and shakes her head. “Don’t be mad at them,” she murmurs. “I’m the only one who deserves your anger. Each of them came to plead your case with me individually, and they collectively refused to show up for family dinner unless I made you two come back home. I had to tell them, and they all love you enough to stand back when that was what you needed most. I told them that we’d give you six weeks to find your way back to each other with no interference whatsoever, and then I’d tell you everything.”

Valentina stares at Sierra, Raven, and Alanna. “Is this why you’ve been so distant in our group chat, and why you haven’t been taking my calls?”

The girls nod, and Sierra's eyes fill with tears. "I can't keep a secret, Val. You know I can't. I was so close to telling you everything every single time we spoke, but Grandma was right. You both have such strong personalities, and you needed to figure this out together, without all the factors that forced you together. I know you're mad at me, but I don't regret what I did."

"What about blacklisting us?" I ask, my anger surprisingly tempered. "How could you do that to Valentina after how hard she fought for her position as COO?"

Grandma smiles then. "You aren't blacklisted, and you both still hold your positions at Windsor Finance. To be perfectly honest with you, I'm close to begging you to get back to work. I'm far too old to be working this hard. I sent out a company memo notifying our staff that you were both on leave due to personal circumstances and left it at that. Silas and Lexington intercepted all your job applications and sent you rejections. We couldn't risk word spreading about a fallout in our family, so we had no other choice. Thankfully, you both use company-owned devices that are easy to control, or so Silas and Lexington tell me. The only one we failed to intercept was the Canadian one."

I glance at my wife, unsure what to do or say. I'm not even sure what to think of all of this. I knew my grandmother was up to something, but this extends further than I even could've imagined.

"For now," Dion says. "Sit down."

"Where are we going?" I ask.

"Not Canada, that's for sure," Zane chimes in.

I glance at my wife, and she nods. That's all it takes for me to lead her to our usual seats, despite the way my thoughts are reeling. If this is where she wants to be, then this is where we'll stay.

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Chapter Sixty-Nine

LUCA

"Are you okay?" Valentina asks, her voice soft. I turn to face her, my gaze roaming over our large hotel suite. We ended up landing in Hawaii, but I'm not sure how to feel about this impromptu family trip.

"I'm not sure," I tell her honestly. "Are you?"

She nods. "The photo surprised me, but it makes sense that our fathers knew each other. Knowing that he's at least partially responsible for me getting my job hurts, but I also know that I did everything in my power to prove to both myself and everyone else that I deserve my job. It doesn't sit well with me, but it's okay. All that really matters is that Grandma Anne gave me a chance — the reason why is irrelevant at this point."

"I knew," I tell her, my voice soft. "When we ran into him, I confronted my grandmother, and she admitted that our fathers were friends. I was

worried about you, baby. I didn't want you to cast a shadow on your hard work, so I kept it from you."

She grins at me and tilts her head a little. "I figured as much. You did it because it was in my best interests, right?"

Valentina walks up to me and wraps her arms around my neck, her eyes on mine. "Similarly, Grandma Anne meant well too," she murmurs. "If we think about it objectively, did we ultimately benefit from her actions? Take the emotion out of it, Luca. If you stop focusing on the fact that we were manipulated and instead focus on what she aimed to accomplish, would you say that her meddling was in our best interest?"

I pull her closer, and she rises to her tiptoes. "I hate it when you're so rational," I whisper against her lips. "Can't you just let me be mad?"

She buries her hand through my hair and shakes her head. "How can I, when I know that her heart is in the right place? I just keep thinking about what I would do if it had been Abuela. Could I have stayed mad? Would I come to regret the time I spent arguing with her? If she hadn't done what she did, would we have ended up together at all? Would we be standing here, on equal footing? Luca, tell me honestly. Would our marriage be as strong as it is without her?"

I sigh and lift her into my arms, unwilling to admit that she's right. I don't want reason right now, not when I'm still so fucking mad. How can she not blame my grandmother for all the stress she caused? I could forgive her if she hadn't touched Valentina, but for a few weeks, she made my wife believe that she'd lost it all. Not only was she barely coping with the loss of her grandmother, she also had to suddenly cope with losing the job she fought so hard for. How can she just forgive Grandma for that so easily?

Valentina wraps her legs around my waist and smiles at me. "You know I'm right. If you hadn't been evicted, I may not have snapped out of the spiral I was in. The only reason I was able to pull myself out of that was because I felt like you needed me. If that hadn't happened, I'd have continued to convince myself that you were better off without me."

I hum noncommittally as I carry her to our bed. "Maybe."

She chuckles and shakes her head as I lay her down. Her hair spreads across our pillows beautifully, and I just stand there and stare for a moment. "I am so fucking in love with you," I murmur, mesmerized. Today, she's in a simple pair of leggings and a loose t-shirt, yet I can't tear my eyes off her. She's so gorgeous. "I hate the thought of anyone hurting you. Knowing that

it’s my family that added to your worries when you were already going through so much is unforgivable.”

“Yet I don’t blame them at all, babe,” she says. “I don’t think you should, either. I know how much you missed your family, and you know how much they love you. They’re all a little crazy, but their hearts are in the right place.”

I lie down next to her and turn to face her. “No matter what you decide, I’ll be on your side,” she tells me, and I just stare at her in disbelief. How could she dismiss my grandmother’s actions so easily? I pull her closer and hug her tightly, my thoughts turning to Abuela. Truth be told, had it been Abuela who did this to us, I’d instantly forgive her too. I get where she’s coming from, and she’s right to say that everything turned out fine, but what if it hadn’t?

Valentina pushes me onto my back and climbs on top of me, her hands running over my body. She smiles as she lifts herself off me just enough to pull her dress off. “Tell me you can feel this too,” she murmurs, her hands roaming over my body. I smile as she pulls off my t-shirt, her gaze filled with the same love I feel. “This intimacy between us, it wasn’t there just a few weeks ago. It feels different, right?”

I hum noncommittally. She’s right, of course, but I don’t feel like admitting that. My eyes trail over her body, and I sigh happily as she undoes her bra and smirks before letting it fall.

I start to reach for her, but she shakes her head. “Hands off,” she murmurs. “Just lie back and enjoy this, babe. I have something to say, and you’re going to listen to me. If you do, I’ll let you fuck me however you please.”

I grunt in dissatisfaction and put my hands behind my head reluctantly. Her hands slide over my fly, and she looks at me as she undoes my jeans. “Do you remember when I told you I thought I hated you?” she asks as she grabs my cock.

I groan, annoyed at the memory but at her fucking mercy when she touches me like that. “Of course I fucking remember.”

She smiles as she takes off her panties and sits down on top of me, naked. Valentina bites down on her lip and slides her wet pussy over my cock, teasing me. “I stopped hating you long ago, but I’m not sure all of my resentment would’ve disappeared if I’d never been given a chance to truly choose you, with nothing hanging over my head.”

I groan when the tip of my cock slips into her, only for her to move back a little. She keeps doing that, driving both of us insane. The way she pants every time my cock rubs against her clit is fucking beautiful, and I'm not sure how much more I can take.

"If your grandma hadn't done what she did, I'd never have had an opportunity to find out what you'd do if you were ever put in my father's position. For the rest of our lives, I'd live with irrational fears."

"Baby," I groan. "*Please*. How am I supposed to focus on anything you're saying when your pussy is dripping all over my cock? How much longer are you going to tease me like that?"

She chuckles and lets the tip of my cock slip into her. "You know you weren't going to listen to me unless I cornered you somehow."

"Fucking tease," I murmur. "I'll make you pay for this."

She chuckles and lets me have another inch of her pussy. It's probably meant to be consolation, but it just drives me even more wild. "Luca," she moans, and I chuckle when I realize she's having just as hard of a time focusing as she gyrates her hips, letting part of my cock slip in and out of her.

"Do... do you… if…" she stammers, losing her train of thought.

I thrust my hips upwards and push into her a little further, but she's too fast for me. Valentina throws me a chastising look and keeps me from slamming all the way into her. She's going to drive me insane.

"Luca, if not for what happened, would you ever be sure that I'm not at least partially with you because you're a Windsor?"

"Fine," I moan. "Fine, baby. You win. You're right, okay? What she did put both of our worst fears to rest. I admit it."

She smiles and lets me push into her halfway. I'm near fucking delirious, and I'll admit it, I'm a fucking simp for my wife.

"One more thing," she says as she pulls away, nearly letting my cock slip out of her. "Tell me you'll forgive your family."

I run a hand through my hair and thrust my hips up desperately. "I'll do whatever the fuck you want me to do, baby. All I want is for you to be happy. If that's what it takes, then that's what I'll do."

"Good," she murmurs as she finally takes all of me. The way her pussy sucks down on my cock is fucking unreal. "Then let me make you happy in return, Luca. Fuck me."

I smirk as I grab her and turn us over in one smooth move, pulling out almost all the way before slamming into her hard. She moans and grabs my hair as I finally fuck her the way I've been wanting to. "I told you I'd make you pay," I murmur.

She grins at me and wraps her legs around me tightly. "I'm counting on it," she murmurs, her lips finding mine.

Valentina Windsor. I'm certain of it. I'll want her just the same when we're gray and old. This is it for me. She is *it* for me.

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Chapter Seventy

LUCA

I hold Valentina's hand in mine as we walk along the beach, taking the long road to the restaurant we agreed to meet everyone at for breakfast. This is, without a doubt, one of the most beautiful resorts we own. Everything about it is romantic, and it definitely is hard to stay mad at my family in this environment. It's so rare for us to all have some time off together that I don't want to waste time arguing with them, but no doubt, that was something Grandma took into consideration when she brought us all here.

She's such a sly fox, but I have to admit that perhaps, I was wrong about her. I always thought that she didn't truly care about our happiness, but it's clear that she does. She's been scheming for years, but ultimately, it was because she had my best interests at heart. She was trying to abide by my

mother's wishes, and in doing so, she ensured I ended up married to the love of my life. I can't exactly fault her for that.

"Is that Dion?" Valentina asks, pointing ahead. "Why is he walking so far behind Faye?"

I frown and narrow my eyes. "I think so," I murmur. "What are they doing?"

My wife and I watch from a distance as Dion slowly catches up to Faye. It's obvious that she's startled and didn't realize he was behind her, because she whirls around and nearly drops her phone.

"Looks like they're arguing," Valentina says, her tone concerned.

Just a few weeks till their wedding, and they don't seem to be doing well at all. Based on Dion's body language, I suspect it's her boyfriend she was speaking to on the phone. What a fucking mess. I've never seen Dion lose his shit like that, but I suppose it's only right that the only one who can make him lose his cool is his soon-to-be wife.

Valentina gasps when Dion grabs her phone and pulls his arm back before throwing it far into the ocean. "Fuck," I mutter, before bursting out laughing. "*Fuck*."

My wife elbows me and throws me a glare. "It's not funny, Luca."

I shrug. "It kind of is. He always said he didn't want to marry her, but does that look like a man who isn't interested in his fiancée? Dion is usually so fucking uptight and unshakeable, but look at him now. She's going to break down all his walls and it'll be funny as fuck. It's his own fault for keeping his distance from her for so long, baby. Faye is unintentionally going to make him pay for his indifference, and I'm here for it."

Valentina shakes her head and drags me along. Dion and Faye make it to the breakfast venue before we do, and I'm not at all surprised to find them sitting on opposite ends of the long table. Everyone falls silent when we walk in, and the girls look at Valentina with puppy-eyes, clearly remorseful for keeping Grandma's plans from us.

"You made it," Grandma says, rising from her seat. She points to the two seats closest to her and smiles. "Come sit."

Valentina squeezes my hand and throws me an encouraging look. Goddamn it. She's right, isn't she? Our marriage is much stronger now than it was before. It truly feels real now. There's nothing standing between us anymore, and whether I like it or not, we have my grandmother to thank for it.

I help her into her seat before joining her. My brothers all stare at me, most of them barely able to face me. Even Ares looks guilty. Fuckers, all of them.

My wife places her hand on my thigh, and I glance at her. She smiles at me so sweetly, so pleadingly, that I can't help but give in. I turn toward my grandmother and sigh. "I'm not any less mad, but I understand where you were coming from." My gaze roams over each of my siblings, my anger simmering. "I'll let this go, but if any of you ever touch my wife again, I'll walk away from every single one of you. Fuck with me all you want, I'm used to it — but you don't touch her. Telling her she lost her job? It's unacceptable, and one way or another, I'll make you all pay for your deception."

Valentina pinches my thigh and sits up. "What he means is that we *love* all of you, and while we're hurt by your actions, we understand that it came from a good place. Ultimately, we're better for it, and that's all that really matters. You guys are the family I never had, and even if you're a bit meddlesome, I couldn't bear losing you. I wouldn't have made it through the loss of my grandmother if not for you, and honestly, I don't think I'd be who I am today without you guys."

She turns toward my grandma and smiles. "If not for you, Grandma Anne, I wouldn't have had the job that became such a big part of my identity, and I wouldn't have had a chance to get a degree. I definitely wouldn't have learned enough to become the COO of Windsor Finance at such a young age. Besides, you're the reason Luca and I ended up together at all, and I'm grateful for you in so many ways." She leans back in her seat and glances at me for a moment before turning back toward my family. "Just like Luca, I *am* hurt, but we'll give all of you a chance to make it up to us."

"Anything," Grandma says, her expression one I've never seen before. She looks remorseful, grateful, and so incredibly loving.

Valentina looks at me, and I nod, a smile on my face. "We'd like to get married," she says, her voice soft. "Right here, with all of you around. I'd love for my mother to be here too, but I'm sure we can make that happen, can't we?"

Sierra squeals and grabs Raven's arm, and my brothers all smile. The relief in the room is palpable. I wrap my arm around Valentina, and she leans into me. "While we're legally already married, we never had a proper

ceremony," I say. "Out of respect for Abuela, we want to keep our ceremony small, and this place seems perfect for it."

Raven rises to her feet, her eyes wide with excitement. "Oh God," she murmurs. "There's so much to do! I have the perfect dress for you! I can get it flown in within hours."

Sierra rises alongside her and smirks. "Leave everything to us," she says. "Give us two days, and we'll give you the wedding of your dreams."

Valentina looks at me and smiles, her eyes twinkling. I never would've forgiven them so easily if not for her. She truly is everything to me. The calm to my chaos. The light to my darkness. The love of my life.

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Chapter Seventy-One

LUCA

I stand at the aisle on the beach, under a gazebo Sierra had constructed for us. It's beautiful, and it looks similar to the one I first kissed Valentina in. Even I have to admit that my family outdid themselves. For two days straight, they barely slept. They all spent every second organizing this wedding, and it shows. Everything is perfect, right down to the last detail. This beach has been turned into a floral oasis, and I know it's exactly what Valentina wanted.

"Why are you so nervous?" Zane asks as my brothers take their place by my side. "You know you're already married, right?"

I glare at him, and he chuckles.

"If you haven't forgiven us yet, you will when you see Val," Ares says. "Raven outdid herself with the dress."

I roll my eyes. “The only reason you’re even saying that is so you can brag about your wife’s design skills. Just shut up.”

Lexington chuckles. “Yeah, tell him. Besides, we all know who really carried this wedding. I’m the one who had to go get your mother-in-law.”

“That’s the only thing you did, you fucker,” Zane says. “You escaped while Sierra and Raven put us to work. Do you have any idea how much we suffered?”

I groan and slip my hand into my pocket. I intended to grab my watch, but my fingers brush over a piece of paper instead. The biggest smile makes its way onto my face when I pull out a pink sticky note. God, I even love her handwriting. I can’t wait to see her. Ever since we said we wanted to get married, Grandma has kept her away from me, saying I couldn’t see my bride until the wedding. It’s been fucking torture.

Luca, the last two days have felt endless, and I miss you more than I thought was possible. I can’t wait to walk down the aisle, but even more so, I can’t wait for the rest of our life together. Thank you for loving every single part of me, especially at times when I didn’t think I was worthy of love. I love you.

“You’re so fucking lucky,” Dion says, a hint of longing in his voice. I snap out of my daze and hide Valentina’s note in my pocket. That wasn’t meant for his eyes at all.

I smile at him and glance at Faye, who is seated next to Grandma, Silas, and Alanna. Valentina asked her to be a bridesmaid, but she declined, probably because she knew she was only asked because we didn’t want to leave her out. I’ve always liked her, and throughout the years, I’ve interacted with her enough to know that she’s a good person. She’s kind and levelheaded, and though Dion might not see it, she’s perfect for him. “You’re just as lucky,” I tell him. “You just don’t see it yet.”

He scoffs, but I pay him no mind, because Sierra and Raven appear at the end of the aisle. They walk toward us hand in hand, and I can’t help but chuckle. They argued endlessly about who got to be Valentina’s maid of honor, until ultimately, she decided to give both of them the joint title.

If this wedding has shown me anything, it’s how loved Valentina and I both are. I understand why she was so quick to forgive now. Everyone here wants the best for us, and there isn’t much they wouldn’t do for us. Perhaps I take them for granted sometimes, but no longer. Valentina won’t let me, after all.

“Fuck,” I murmur when I lay eyes on her. She walks toward me, her arm hooked around her mother’s. Valentina is wearing a beautiful tight wedding dress that hugs her curves and flares out at the bottom, a train behind her. Her hair is loose, just the way I love it, and it envelops her body, hanging down in beautiful waves. “Goddamn.” If there’s one moment I want to remember for the rest of our lives, it’s this one. She looks at me and smiles, her cheeks perfectly rosy. Nothing has ever felt quite this right.

My mother-in-law places her hand in mine, and she smiles up at me with a level of trust she’s never given me before. “I know you’ll make her happy,” Mom says, and I nod. She glances between the two of us, and then she nods once before stepping back.

My siblings and Raven follow her lead, and everyone sits down, leaving Valentina and me standing together, the officiant by our side.

“We are gathered here today to witness the union of Valentina and Luca,” she says, and I can’t help but smirk. I’ve waited for this day longer than Valentina will ever know. Her in a white wedding dress has been a fantasy of mine for longer than it should have been. She’s all I can focus on as the ceremony starts, and the look in her eyes tells me it’s the same for her.

The officiant tells us to exchange our vows, and I grab the ring she hands me, a smile on my face as I place Valentina’s wedding ring on the tip of her finger.

“A *minimum* of three years is what I asked for,” I tell her, my voice soft. “Because even then, I knew three years with you would never be enough for me. It’s the very least I wanted with you, but now even that seems far too short. If I can, I’d like to spend a minimum of three lifetimes with you, Valentina. I’ll be true to you, and I’ll honor you in every single way. I’ll love you through all the seasons in life, through ups and downs, through joy and hardship, for better or for worse.” She smiles at me shakily, visibly emotional, and I smile back at her as I push her wedding ring onto her finger.

“Luca,” she says, her voice shaky as she places my ring on the tip of my finger. “Three lifetimes, huh? That doesn’t sound like nearly enough time with you. For years, we’ve walked side by side, and I promise that’s where I’ll remain. No matter the trials we might face, I’ll be right by your side, enjoying every step of the journey we walk together. I’ll share your happiness and sorrow, your challenges and victories. I promise to love you,

and only you, for who you are, through all the phases of our life together. For better or for worse, Luca, I want it all with you."

My heart skips a beat when she pushes my ring onto my finger, and I glance at it in satisfaction. I've always loved wearing a wedding ring, but it feels even more special now. I can't believe we're standing here, after everything we've been through. Years of distance, resentment, and countless trials. Yet all of it led me to her. All of it only made us stronger.

"I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride."

I smirk as I wrap my hand around her waist and pull her closer. Cheers erupt around us when my lips meet hers, but everything fades away, until all that remains is my wife. Three lifetimes won't be nearly enough.

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Epilogue

VALENTINA

I glare at Luca as I slam my folder down on the boardroom table. “We are *not* investing in that,” I tell him. “I need more operational liquid assets, and I disagree with this distribution.”

Several of our board members nod, while a few of them keep their heads down out of fear of Luca. They’ve gotten used to our quips now. We might be happily married, but at work it’s often hard for people to believe that.

Luca rises from his seat and glares right back at me. “It’s like you forget who the CEO of this firm is, Valentina. If I say we’re investing in it, we’re investing in it!”

“Clearly, we should reconsider the CEO position because you’re not equipped for it if you think that investment is a good idea!”

“Mr. and Mrs. Windsor,” Hana Tanaka, our Chief Compliance Officer, says. “Perhaps it’s best if we put this to a vote. Shall we reconvene next week? If both of you could give us an idea of the return on investment for both your proposals, we’ll take it from there. We don’t need to finalize next year’s budgets in one meeting.” Hana is never fazed by us. I don’t think I’ve ever seen her lose her calm.

“Agreed,” everyone else murmurs, each of them no doubt eager to get out of this meeting. Our board members all rise and exit the room, and Luca and I follow them, throwing daggers at each other the entire time.

He follows me as I walk to my office, and I glance back over my shoulder. “Don’t you have work to do?” I snap.

He smirks at me tauntingly. “My office is right next to yours, Valentina. Why? Were you hoping for something else?”

The edges of my lips turn up into a mischievous smile. “What if I say yes?”

His gaze darkens, and he pulls me into my office, my door slamming closed behind us a second before he roughly pushes me against it. He presses the button that turns my windows opaque and smirks at me.

His lips find mine, and I moan as he kisses me. Luca’s hand wraps around my wrists, and he pushes them above my head, trapping me against the door. “Could you stop making my cock so fucking hard during board meetings, hmm? Watching you dominate a room will never get old.”

I giggle against his lips when he pushes up against me, a rush of desire flowing through me. His free hand roams over my body, stroking my breasts, before moving lower. “Luca,” I warn when his hand slides underneath my skirt.

He chuckles and nips at my bottom lip. “Did you just tell me I’m not equipped to be CEO?” he asks, his voice low, dangerous.

I bite back a smile, and he wipes it off my face entirely when he slips a finger into me. “Looks like this incompetent CEO is making your pussy awfully wet. It’s the one thing I absolutely excel at, don’t you think?” His thumb flicks over my clit roughly, punishingly, and I moan for him, unable to suppress my desire. He knows exactly how to drive me insane, and he revels in it. Luca pulls away a little to look into my eyes, clearly enjoying my torment. “If I make you come against this door, will you let me invest in that biotech deal?”

I shake my head and try my hardest to hide my amusement. “*No*.”

He kisses me, his tongue slowly tangling with mine. “What if I go down on my knees right now and eat your pussy?”

His movements become more intense, and he knows he’s got me close already. I can tell by the way he smiles.

“No,” I tell him as I pull my wrists out of his hold. “But if you fuck me, I’m willing to talk about it.”

He growls as he pulls away a little to undo his suit trousers, but just as the button comes undone, a knock on my door interrupts us. “Goddamn it,” he murmurs. “I’m firing whoever is at the other end of this fucking door.”

He runs a hand through his hair and straightens out his clothes while I do the same, both of us equally frustrated. We’re both so busy that we often pass out by the time we actually get home. These office hook-ups have become the highlight of our days.

“Come in,” I call as I sit down behind my desk, Luca by my side, his arm on the back of my chair.

We both tense when three men walk into my office, and Luca’s stance turns protective. “What the fuck are you doing here?” he growls. “I thought I told you not to show up here without an appointment?”

I stare in shock at my father, and vaguely recognize the two men with him. One of them is Hugo Garcia, the chairman of the Garcia family’s empire, and my father’s older cousin. He is the real power behind the family, yet he doesn’t appear in public very often. Seeing him here is shocking enough, but it’s the younger man that has me raising a hand to my heart in surprise. Mateo Garcia… my younger brother. I’ve caught glimpses of him at events before, but we’ve never been quite this close before.

“I came bearing both gifts and apologies,” Hugo tells my husband, a polite smile on his face. He turns to me then and places his hand on my father’s shoulder. “I’ve been calling, but you keep declining my calls, Luca.”

Mateo glances at our father, and my eyes widen when he kicks the back of his legs, bringing him to his knees harshly on my cold marble office floor. “Apologize to my sister or this is the last you’ll see of me,” he murmurs, his voice soft, as though he didn’t want me to hear.

Hugo clears his throat and glances at me apologetically. “When our corporation suddenly received several blows from the Windsor family, we were at a loss,” he tells me. “As far as I knew, we hadn’t done anything to offend the Windsors, so I set out to investigate what happened. It took a

while, but eventually, I got to the truth. Valentina, words cannot make up for the pain and loss you were forced to suffer. Nothing matters more to me than family, and I'd like you to know that your father's behavior has nothing to do with me, or the rest of the Garcia family. We do not support or condone the way he's treated you, and while I understand that you may want nothing to do with us, I'd love nothing more than a chance to get to know you. As your uncle, I would like you to know that there will always be a place for you by my side. I understand that you're married now, but to me, you will always be a Garcia."

Mateo walks up to my desk, his gaze filled with the same remorse that's in his uncle's eyes. "I never knew about you," he says, his voice soft. "If I'd known I had an older sister, I never would've stood by and let things be. You wouldn't know this, but I've quietly admired you for years. You were an inspiration to me long before I found out that we're related, and if you'd give me a chance, I'd really like to get to know you. I will respect whatever choice you make, but I want you to know that these aren't just empty words. Both my uncle and I would like to make up for what happened."

He hands me a stack of documents, a shaky smile on his face. Luca's hand wraps around my shoulder as I stare at the papers, my eyes widening. "You're giving me shares to Garcia Ltd *and* ReInsure?"

Hugo nods. "You're a Garcia. Your father's shares have been redistributed between you and your brother, as they rightfully should have been. Even if you want absolutely nothing to do with us, this is the least we can do for you. Of course, I hope you'll take this as a token of goodwill and give us a chance. We've missed out on so much already, and I'm not getting any younger. I may never be able to take your father's place, but if you let me, I'd like to be part of your life."

I stare at the documents and look up at him. "Clever," I murmur. "The Garcia shares are a true gift, I'll admit that much, but ReInsure? Giving me that means I'll have to salvage and rebuild it, or it'll be my loss."

Hugo grins at me. "Truthfully, I'm not to blame for that. Your husband told me the only way I'm allowed to so much as speak to you is if I give you everything your father gained by walking away from you, right down to the land that ReInsure's headquarters were built on. Of course I hope you'll rebuild it, but it truly is up to you. The Garcia family isn't so weak that we can't sustain the loss of one single company amongst everything we own. If you want to blow the whole thing up, I'll make that happen for you. Since

you're a Garcia, I have no doubt you're every bit as temperamental as your little brother is. Perhaps that would appease you a little."

I lean back in my seat and shake my head. "If I damage the company any further, it'll affect the employees, and they've never wronged me." I look up at my uncle and smile coldly. "I'll turn it into Windsor Insurance."

I expected him to be offended, but he merely smiles at me and nods. "Whatever you want, Valentina. It's yours."

Mateo nudges our father with his foot, and I stare at him, surprised to find this prideful man on his knees. "I apologize," he says, sounding pained. His apology sounds empty, as though he's merely sorry he got caught but doesn't regret the pain he caused. I always thought it was the entire Garcia family that rejected me. It never even occurred to me that it was just my father and his parents, and I'm not sure what to think about.

Hugo smiles at me. "I'd really like it if you'd come home sometime, Valentina. You have so many cousins that would love to meet you. My wife, your tía Liliana, would really like to have you over for dinner. Will you please think about it?"

I nod, my heart wavering. The thought of having a family of my own, of being wanted and loved by them… I thought I'd given up on it, but I'd be lying to myself if I said that his words don't give me hope. "I… I'll think about it… *Tío*."

He grins at me so widely that it's hard to believe that the man standing in front of me could easily rival Grandma Anne.

"I'll be waiting," he tells me, and I can't help but smile back. I glance up at my husband to find him looking at me with pride. He orchestrated all of this, simply because he wanted justice for me.

I'm going to make sure he feels as loved as I do, every second of every day, for the rest of our lives. And with a bit of luck, I'll do it all over again if we ever meet again in another life — because one lifetime with this man could never be enough for me.

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Epilogue: 10 Years Later

LUCA

"What did you do at school today?" I ask my son, Evan. He grins up at me and wraps his little arms around my leg, hugging me tightly. My heart can barely take it. He's so fucking adorable, and he looks so much like his mother.

"I played with my friends," he tells me. "And I saw Bella at recess."

"Yeah?" I murmur as we wait for Isabella at the school gate. "Was she scared? It was only her first day, so you looked after your baby sister, right?"

Evan bursts out laughing and shakes his head. "Bella? Come on, Dad. She's never scared."

I bite back a smile and shake my head. He's right, of course. My daughter is only four, but she truly is fearless. She has Valentina's

temperament and intelligence, and it's amazing, because watching my wife deal with her mini-me is the highlight of my life.

"Daddy!"

My heart nearly bursts every single time I hear her call me that. I bend down and catch her as she jumps into my arms, and her tiny arms wrap around my neck. So fucking cute. Today she's yet again dressed completely in pink, right down to her little hairband. It's hilarious to me, because it feels like payback for the pink frenzy Valentina made me suffer through. Isabella refuses to wear anything that isn't pink, and it's driving my wife insane, while Raven is loving it.

I hold Evan's hand while my daughter hangs onto me like a little monkey. "Are we going to see mommy?" Evan asks, his tone eager. "I made her a present today."

I chuckle and nod. "Yep," I tell him as I buckle both kids in. "But why is it that only mommy ever gets presents?" I ask as I sit down opposite them. Our driver closes the door just as I click my own seatbelt into place.

Evan straight-up ignores me, and I bite back a smile. Both of our kids are as obsessed with Valentina as I am, and I can't even fault them for it.

"Daddy," Isabella says. "Did I show you what Tío Mateo gave me because I started school?"

She holds out her arm, and my eyes widen when I see her little bracelet, a small pendant hanging off it. Did my dumbass brother-in-law seriously give my daughter a bracelet with diamonds in it? Is he insane? "It's a Milagro heart charm! He says it's for good luck!"

Evan nods and pulls out a necklace from underneath his little shirt. "I got one too, but mine looks like a hand, not a heart."

I briefly bury my face in my hands when I notice that Evan's pendant also has diamonds in it. My family has been banned from buying them ridiculous gifts, but there's no stopping my in-laws. Just a few days ago, two miniature cars showed up in front of our house, one in pink, and one in black — purely because Hugo had bought a new supercar and he wanted the kids to have matching ones they could drive to their uncles' houses with on the Windsor estate. They're going to drive me insane.

Isabella gasps. "We're here!" She always looks up at the office with such reverence, and it's truly adorable.

"Mr. Windsor," I hear all around me as we walk to the elevator, each staff member pausing for a moment to greet the kids and me.

“Can I press the button?” Evan asks, and I nod as I lift him into my arms so he can reach the panel. He wraps his arms around my neck, and I carry him as we head toward Valentina’s office, Isabella ten steps ahead of us. I have no idea where she gets all of that energy. She’s like a fucking whirlwind.

“Mommy!” she shouts.

Valentina looks up from her desk and smiles, her face lighting up as Bella runs around her desk and jumps into her arms. “My baby,” she murmurs as she kisses Isabella’s cheek.

Evan jumps out of my arms to join in, and I sigh as I stand back, defeated and abandoned. “What about me?” I ask, but the kids just ignore me. The moment they saw their mother, they just abandoned me. I guess I can’t blame them.

Valentina smiles up at me, her gaze lingering. “I love you, Luca,” she tells me. Fuck. Hearing that really never gets old. Throughout the years, we’ve gone through so many phases in our lives together, but each of them brought us closer. I thought I couldn’t love her more than I did ten years ago, yet each day, my love for her continues to grow.

I walk up to my family and lean in to press a soft kiss on my wife’s forehead. “I love you more, baby,” I murmur, my lips brushing over her ear. “I’ll show you just how much tonight,” I whisper.

“Mommy!” Isabella says, and I pull away, enjoying the way her cheeks still get rosy. “My teacher asked me what I want to be when I grow up, and I want to be just like you. I want to work here too. Can I?”

Evan nods and hugs his mother tighter. “Me too!”

Valentina has been instilling a good work ethic in them, and it shows. She’s kind and patient, and she never puts too much pressure on the kids, but she ensures that they know the value of hard work, whether that’s chores or homework.

“You want to become a CEO, Bella?” I ask. “It’s not easy doing Mommy’s job, you know?”

Two years after Isabella was born, Valentina became CEO, and I became chairman of our company, freeing up more of my time to spend with our kids. It’s the best decision we’ve ever made. She excels at this job, and she loves it more than I ever did.

I gently brush Bella’s hair out of her face as she asks Valentina endless questions about her job, my heart overflowing with love. I never knew true

happiness before Valentina, and the kids have made an already perfect life even better.

"I told you so," I murmur.

Valentina looks up, confusion in her eyes.

I smile at her. "Ten years ago, I told you that I couldn't put all of your fears to rest just yet, but ten years from then, we'd look back at that moment and I'd tell you *I told you so*."

Her eyes light up, and she nods, her gaze filling with a love so powerful that it takes all of me to keep standing here and not steal her away from our kids.

"I told you so," I whisper.

She chuckles. "I've never been happier that you were right," she tells me. "I love you, Luca. So much."

I brush the back of my hand over her cheek, my heart bursting with emotions that can't be described as mere love, yet that's the only word that comes close.

"I love you more," I murmur. Every second of every day, I love her more.

WANT A LITTLE MORE OF LUCA AND VAL? THERE ARE A FEW DELETED scenes you can download from my website, including one where Sierra and Val get arrested for breaking into Xavier's office, and one from when Luca blacklisted Val. This book is incredibly long, so those scenes had to be cut out.

More from Catharina Maura

- Raven and Ares's story: The Wrong Bride
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