The
UNWANTED
MARRIAGE
USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
CATHARINA MAURA

The Unwanted Marriage

DION & FAYE'S STORY

THE WINDSORS

BOOK THREE

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This one is for those of us that let life pass us by under the guise of doing the right thing. Keep making those difficult choices that you know you must, until your waking hours are better than your sweetest dreams.

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Trigger Warning

This book contains sensitive themes, including but not limited to domestic violence in the female main character's home (none between Dion and Faye) and parental loss.

Even though retribution and a *happily ever after* ending are guaranteed, reader discretion is advised.

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Chapter One

Dion

When my grandmother asked my siblings and me to gather in our formal drawing room, I'd known. I hadn't wanted to admit it to myself, but I'd known that my time was up.

Grandma's eyes roam over the room, and while she studies my four brothers and my little sister, I study her. I take in her perfectly styled shoulder-length hair, the blue suit she's wearing, and the sheer uncompromising ruthlessness in her demeanor. There's no kindness in her gaze today.

I tense when she clears her throat, my stomach sinking the moment those cold green eyes settle on me. I knew what she'd say before she even parted her lips, but that doesn't lessen the weight of her words.

"Dion, your wedding date has been set," she announces, her tone carrying a finality that I struggle to come to terms with. "The wedding will be held six months from now."

The tension in the room is palpable, the air laced with defeat. "I see," I murmur, unable to keep my voice steady. My usual mask of indifference fails me tonight, and I lower my gaze, unwilling to worry my siblings needlessly.

Arranged marriages are a Windsor tradition, and I've known for years that this day would come. Out of all my siblings, I'm the only one who's been engaged for years, the only one who's known who I'd marry for over a

decade now. That never made it easier. No — if anything, it's felt like a slow walk toward the gallows, until, at last, my fate is sealed.

My grandmother begins to discuss wedding plans, details, and timelines, but I struggle to focus on her words. All I can think about is Faye, my fiancée.

Thoughts of her are always accompanied by remorse, and today is no different. Remorse for everything I've taken from her, and everything I'm yet to destroy. She should've had her entire life ahead of her, but instead, I'll ruin what's left of her.

"Dion?" my grandmother says, cutting through the haze. My eyes snap up, and I realize the room has fallen silent. "Need I remind you of our agreement? It's time to stop avoiding Faye."

I clench my jaw and nod curtly. Faye and I have been engaged since we were children, but I wasn't informed of it until I was sixteen. The second I could, I escaped to boarding school, followed by college overseas. The idea of marrying someone ten years younger horrified me, but even then, there was more to it. It was the fact that it was *her*.

I kept running, choosing to focus on the global expansion of our conglomerate after college, just so I didn't have to face her more than a few times a year. Working overseas bought me a bit more time, but it wasn't enough.

It'll never be enough.

My grandmother continues to speak, but I can't take another moment of this. Before I realize what I'm doing, I'm out the door and halfway through our estate, my thoughts whirling. I keep walking, needing the fresh air, the chill in the wind — anything to keep my mind off Faye.

I'm so caught up in my thoughts that I hadn't been fully aware of where my feet led me. My heart twists painfully as I pause in front of a familiar building, the sharp pain a welcome deviation from the numbness that had overtaken me when I left the drawing room. I hadn't meant to come here, but there is obviously no escaping my guilt tonight.

My fingers gently brush over the hidden compartment in the wall, and I push against one of the bricks, exposing a spare key. Our childhood home is the only building on our estate that we never upgraded with the new tech we installed everywhere else. Though we never discussed it, my siblings and I came to a silent agreement to leave it untouched. Perhaps we all

simply wanted to preserve what's left of our parents, or maybe none of us are quite ready to let go. I'm not sure we ever will be.

The house is quiet when I walk in, and though it looks the same as I remember it, it feels different. This home, that was once filled with warmth, feels empty, and it hits me just as hard as it did twenty years ago.

Somehow, a small part of me expected my mother to walk down the stairs, a sweet smile on her face as she welcomes me home. Knowing I'll never get to see her again still hurts the same. More so today than usual.

I draw a shaky breath, and my lungs seize as I try to breathe through the dull pain in my chest. I'd give the world to have my parents here with me today, and knowing that nothing I could ever do will bring them back tears at my tattered soul.

I pause in front of my father's liquor cabinet and let myself wonder what it'd be like to share a glass with him. What advice would he have for me tonight? He adored Faye when she was a child, and I doubt that would've changed.

My hand trembles as I grab a bottle of his finest whiskey and bring it to my lips. The liquor warms my throat, and I welcome the feeling as I continue to walk through the house, until my feet come to a standstill in front of my mother's piano. I stand frozen in place, my heart hollow. The concert grand was custom-built for her, right down to the Windsor crest detailing in real gold on the top board, and the rosewood finishing that she let me choose. It's a beauty fit for the queen she was, and I'd give the world to hear her play for me one last time. I'd lay down my life to see one more smile.

I take several more deep swigs of my father's whiskey, and for a brief moment, I wonder what Mom would think if she saw me now. Would she be disappointed that I stopped playing the piano? Once again, my thoughts turn to Faye, and I take another step forward.

My mother would've loved the woman Faye has become, even if it's just because she's a concert pianist, just like both of our mothers were. Mom would've asked to play duets with her in this room, and they'd never run out of things to talk about. She'd tell Faye all about how she once taught me to play, and how she wanted me to follow in her footsteps. If I hadn't lost her, would I have?

I sit down on my mother's piano bench, the sheet music untouched. *La Campanella*. Her favorite. She didn't even need to read the notes to play it

— the sheet music was for me. It's the last piece she tried teaching me, and one of the few I never had the heart to master. Not truly.

I lightly brush my fingers over the ivories, my heart heavy. "I miss you," I whisper, desperate for a reply. When none comes, I lift my father's bottle to my lips again, drinking deeply. Desperation dictates my moves as I place the bottle by my feet and begin to play, the melody starting off slow. My eyes move across the notes, and for a moment, I remember why I loved playing so much, back when the sound of a piano didn't rip my heart to pieces, back when it was our thing — Mom and mine.

The song is distorted, ruined by the piano's need for tuning, but somehow, it suits my mood far better than the normally light and uplifting tilt of Liszt's famous tune. It sounds as broken as I am, and the notes I miss would've made my mother cringe. She'd have flinched at the way I'm butchering her favorite piece, the way her piano sounds due to my negligence, and then she'd have pasted on a bright reassuring smile, because that's who she was. She was warmth, love, and the light in my life. My world has been cast in shadows since the day I lost my parents, and I don't think I'll ever claw my way out.

The melody turns darker, rougher, the acoustics of this room still as perfect as they've always been, but it does nothing to soothe my aching heart. The final note echoes, and I exhale shakily as I rest my forehead against the music shelf.

"I never thought I'd hear you play again."

I tense and turn my head to find my sister standing in the doorway, her expression as haunted as mine likely is. How did she know where to find me?

I shake the thought off and smile wryly. No, of course she knew. Sierra and I are made of the same ilk. She shines brightly, the way Mom always did, but behind her smile hides a depth most can't fathom. Out of all of us, she's the most observant, the most caring. She feels things deeply, both highs and lows, and she hurts alongside every one of our siblings. Tonight might be hard for me, but witnessing my pain will break her heart more than it does mine. I know I should fake it for her and be the big brother she deserves, but I can't. Not tonight.

She walks toward me and kneels beside my bench, a shaky smile on her lips. I hold my arm open for her, and she hugs me tightly. I sigh as I place my chin on top of her head and hug her back.

“I don’t think I can do this,” I admit, my voice barely above a whisper. She’s the only person who knows about the guilt and shame I carry, the sins that weigh heavy on me.

“It wasn’t your fault, Dion,” she lies.

“I can’t do this to her. Not her.”

Sierra pulls away to look at me, her expression guarded. “But you must, and if it’s absolution you seek, what better way to find it than by making Faye happy? Maybe you’ll find that in doing so, you’ll experience the happiness you deserve, too. Because you do, Dion. You deserve to be happy.”

I look into my sister’s eyes, taking in her sincerity. How could she possibly believe that with such fierceness, such conviction? How could she sit here without blaming me for everything I’ve taken from her, from us?

Would she still feel the same way if she knew about the viciousness I hide away? I’m worried my venom will end up infecting Faye too. Being with me will taint her, corrupt her — and a sick, wicked part of me *wants* it to. What would Sierra say if I admit that I haven’t just been running away from my fiancée out of guilt?

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Chapter Two

Faye

My back is perfectly straight as I raise a fork to my lips, the slight tremor in my hand betraying the dread that's taking root deep in my gut. I tighten my grip on the metal, willing myself to stay calm as I chew on my tasteless poached eggs.

We're all just waiting for it — waiting for Father to snap at us over something. Will it be the food today? Perhaps he'll think we're chewing too loudly. Whatever it is, something is bound to give. Normally, he'd already have left for work by now, and the fact he hasn't does not bode well for any of us.

My stepmother, Abigail, carries the same expression that I undoubtedly do. It's fake pleasantness born from fear. We're both eerily calm, having learned the hard way that any other behavior will set my father off.

I control my breathing and focus on swallowing my food. I won't let him catch me wasting a single bite, no matter how close I am to throwing up.

My anxiety continues to rise as my two younger half-sisters, Linda and Chloe, squirm in their seats. With each passing second, I can see my father's annoyance build. *Please*, I silently beg. Please don't let them be punished for their restlessness.

I'm equal parts glad and fearful that my two younger step-sisters haven't had to learn how to adjust their behavior to our father. It means

there's still hope for them, that their spirits aren't quite broken just yet — but it also means his actions hurt them more than they do me. I've become used to it now, but I hope they'll never have to. Not much longer now. Just a few more months, and things will finally get better.

"Linda," Father says, and she tenses. For a split-second, dread flashes through my sister's eyes, but then she controls it, pasting on the smile we've all perfected. So far, he hasn't hurt the girls, but how much longer can I protect them?

"Yes, Father?"

"When do you leave for college?"

A pang of longing settles deep in my chest, and I take a shaky breath. I only just graduated, but unlike my younger sister, I was never allowed to live on campus. I don't begrudge her the experience, but a small part of me wishes I could've had that too.

"Three weeks from now," she answers, her voice soft, sweet.

Linda has so many choices ahead of her, and I wonder if she realizes what a luxury that is. My sister will get to choose her own major, her friends. She'll leave our father's clutches and escape into a world that will let her shape her own future — it's everything I've ever wanted for her.

I wonder what it might be like to discover your own interests, the way she will. I was forced to major in Business so I'd be knowledgeable enough to have meaningful conversations with Dion, but I never had any interest in it. Everything in my life was by design, all of it meant to turn me into the perfect wife for him.

I'm not even sure I'd be a pianist if not for him. If I was never expected to marry him, would I have been forced to learn? Would my childhood have consisted of rigorous practice and competitions? Maybe — my mother was a famous pianist, after all, and so was my grandfather. My father is convinced it was in Mom's genes, since neither Chloe nor Linda have any talent for it that he can exploit, much to his bitter regret.

"Toward the end of your first semester, you must take time off for Faye's wedding. We'll need you here, and you *will* support your sister."

Despondency turns into desolation as I take another bite of my food, pretending to be unaffected. I'm glad neither of my sisters are standing in my shoes, but I'd give the world to have one single day of true freedom — of not feeling like a sacrifice, a broodmare.

Chloe shifts in her seat, and I glance up at her through my lashes. Two more years, and she too will escape this place we're forced to call home. I, on the other hand, will merely be exchanging it for a different gilded cage.

My mind involuntarily drifts to a different future, one where I'd be free to choose what I wear and where I go, what I eat and how I speak. I'd travel the world, seeking new adventures, even if it's just to figure out what I'd enjoy, who I am. I'd play an abandoned piano in a small train station, simply because I want to, and not because I'm expected to. I'd dance in the rain and drink more than is appropriate, savoring each moment that makes me feel *alive*. I'd hold hands with a man that chose me, that wants me, and we'd be *happy*. When I think of that future, it isn't Dion's green eyes I think of. No. In my wildest dreams, the eyes twinkling back at me are a beautiful coffee brown, the color hinting at the depth of his devotion.

I feel Father's gaze on me moments before his knife clatters against the table, the sound of metal hitting marble an omen I've learned to recognize. "Faye," he says, his voice deceptively calm. "Have you spoken to Dion recently? From what I understand, he's preparing to move back from London, so he'll be here more often now."

My stomach drops at the thought of my fiancé. I haven't heard from him in months, and one way or another, my father will find a way to blame me for it. Our wedding date was set a month ago, but we haven't so much as discussed it with each other. I should've known he'd be moving back soon, but somehow, I thought I had more time left.

"I've contacted him on numerous occasions and he told me that he'd get in touch with me when required," I lie, my tone perfectly calm. I've only called Dion once, a few weeks ago, and it went straight to voicemail. I haven't tried calling him since, but there's no way my father could know that.

Outside of official Windsor events, we don't see each other, and we most certainly don't ever call each other. In fact, I suspect I may be one of the reasons he chose to work at The Windsors' overseas branch. He's always incredibly polite and courteous in person, but it's clear he doesn't want to marry me. His complete and utter disregard of me speaks volumes. I doubt he'll ever know how grateful I am for it. If I'm lucky, he'll treat me the same once we're married.

"Come here, Faye," my father murmurs, his voice soft.

A chill runs down my spine, and my heart begins to pound wildly as dread washes over me. I swallow hard and rise to my feet, my steps measured. I know better than to disobey. My mind is whirling with panic as I pause in front of him, my shoulders hunched in fear. Helplessness tugs at me, but I refuse to give in to it.

Father pushes his chair away from the table, and the scraping sound draws a whimper from Chloe's lips. I glance at her briefly, praying she'll keep her eyes on her plate and her mouth shut. The last thing I want is for his anger to transfer from me to her.

I keep my body still as his hand wraps around my throat, his grip tightening slowly. He never squeezes hard enough to leave marks, but always enough to make breathing difficult. I try my best to stay calm, knowing that panicking will only make this worse for all of us. His fingers dig into my skin, and he squeezes the sides of my neck, allowing me to breathe just enough to stay lucid.

"Need I remind you of what's at stake?" he whispers, his gaze burning with hatred. The Windsors promised him two million for each year I remain married to Dion, up to six million in total, and Father never lets me forget it.

My eyes fill with tears as my lungs battle for air. I can't afford to give into the panic attack I feel building in my chest. If I lose control over the calmness I'm clinging to, he'll only become more violent, and not just toward me.

"No, Father," I croak out. I avert my gaze, unable to take that look in his eyes. I've never been able to figure out why he hates me so much, nor have I been able to lessen the force of his hatred. No matter what I do, I'm never worthy of the kindness that he often shows Linda and Chloe. I'm the only one he hurts like this — never them. I'm grateful they're spared from his cruelty, but I just wish I could be too.

"Now that a wedding date has finally been set, you'd better not give him a reason to postpone this marriage any further. Isn't it bad enough they insisted we wait until you graduated college? I'm done waiting, Faye," he says, tightening his fingers around my neck, until I nod in acquiescence.

"Luca Windsor disobeyed his grandmother and married his secretary instead of his fiancée. In doing so, he set a precedent that could make things difficult for us. Dion never felt like he had a choice, but he knows better now. With only a few months until the wedding, there's no room for mistakes. It's time to switch tactics — instead of avoiding him for fear his

family realizes how inadequate you are, you must now charm him sufficiently to make him overlook your flaws.”

My stomach twists, but I nod nonetheless, resigned to my fate. The last thing I want to do is go anywhere near Dion, but I have no choice. It isn’t just my own life that’s at stake. If I don’t do as he says, he’ll punish my stepmother for it. “Yes, Father,” I murmur, my posture demure despite the defiance burning deep within.

He lets go of me and swipes his phone off the table. “Don’t mess this up,” he warns, before walking out. The door slams closed behind him, and I slowly sink into his vacant seat, my legs unable to carry me a moment longer. I’m trembling, and I hate myself for it. I hate feeling so weak, so helpless.

Chloe reaches for me, her hand wrapping around mine, and I try to force a smile for her. “Are you okay?” she whispers.

I nod and tighten my grip on her hand. I’m not even remotely okay, but I’ve gotten so good at pretending that most days, I fool even myself.

“You should arrange to see Dion soon,” Abigail says, her voice soft. She doesn’t even bother checking up on me. Perhaps she’s just gotten used to this, or maybe she simply doesn’t care about my wellbeing. More and more, I’m starting to wonder if it might be the latter.

When was the last time she tried to defend me? I’d never want her to get between my father and me, because that would only make matters worse, but shouldn’t she at least be a little concerned?

“I will. I’m seeing his sister today, and if he’s back, he might be there too,” I lie, suppressing the wave of guilt that accompanies my words.

“Good,” she breathes. I stare at her for a second and take in her flawless makeup and that beautiful blonde hair that sets the girls and her apart from me. I wonder if there are bruises hidden underneath all the foundation she wears.

“Your father is a good man,” Abigail says, her eyes on her plate. I wonder who she’s trying to convince with her words — me, the girls, or herself? “Just make sure Dion marries you, Faye. Everything will be perfect again once we have the money the Windsors promised us. Your dad hasn’t been the same since his company nearly went bankrupt. The mining industry isn’t what it used to be. He’s doing his best, but he needs the financial help they’ll provide.”

She says that all the time, but my father has been the way he is for as long as I can remember. She's clinging to the person he was over a decade ago, back when his business was still thriving, before his love for alcohol surpassed his love for us.

I sigh and get up, unable to look at her for a moment longer. "I should get ready. I'd hate to keep Sierra Windsor waiting," I say, the lie rolling off my tongue with more ease now.

One more time. I'll be selfish one last time.

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Chapter Three

Faye

"What happened?" Eric asks, his voice laced with concern. He reaches for my hand over the table and entwines our fingers before gently pressing a kiss to the back of my hand. "I don't think I've ever seen you look this upset, Faye."

My eyes widen, and he smiles at me so tenderly that my aching heart skips a beat. I'm so used to being invisible, even in plain sight, that his observations catch me off-guard. My family only sees what they want to, and they've always been blind to my pain. Or maybe they've just grown so accustomed to it that it no longer registers.

For a moment, I wonder what might happen if I told Eric the truth. Would he run away with me? Would he protect me? Or would he be horrified if I told him I'm technically, albeit unwillingly, engaged?

"I'm just worried about my next concert," I murmur, unsure of what else to say. Telling him the truth would taint everything we had. "I'm considering playing something I composed," I add, indulging in the fantasy I've created. My father would never allow me to play something I wrote myself. The few times he caught me practicing a piece I'd composed, he'd reprimanded me severely, leaving me incapable of playing for days.

Yet somehow, right here, right now, I want to pretend. This entire charade will come to an end the moment I break up with Eric, but for a few

more hours, I want to keep pretending that I truly am everything he thinks I am.

When I'm with him, I get to be the person I wish I was every second of every day. Maybe in a different life, the rest of our story wouldn't remain unwritten. In a different life, he could've been the one I'd get to marry, the one I'd get to grow old with.

I glance around the quiet coffeeshop — the same one we first met at all those months ago. He'd spend his lunch breaks here, sitting at the table opposite mine as I studied. The two of us would steal looks at each other, day after day, until he finally gathered the courage to ask if he could sit with me.

I never meant to fall for him. This was never supposed to be more than friendship, but I can't bring myself to regret us. I didn't think I'd ever have the courage to follow my heart, even if it's only for a little while. Eric is the only thing I've ever dared want for myself, the only choice I got to make. He's my only glimmer of happiness in a world that seeks to drown me in despair. He'll never know how much these few months with him meant to me. Having to end our relationship today fills me with a foreign despair — it feels like losing *hope*.

"I'd say that I'd buy a ticket to come see you, but I know you won't let me." He pauses then, smiling. He's never asked more of me than I can give, accepting every one of my excuses each time he wanted something I couldn't commit to. I always wondered why. Does a small part of him know that this thing between us can't last? "So instead, will you please have lunch with me? Today is our six-month anniversary, you know? I'd like to take you on a proper date for once. Will you let me?"

I tense, surprised that he'd remember something like that. It isn't even a true anniversary — today simply marks six months from the day he and I started sharing this little table. It hurts to know that I'll never see him look at me that way again.

"What do you have in mind?" I ask, giving in. Just one more memory. One day of not having to tell him no. That's all I want. When this day ends, I'll go back to playing the role my father wrote for me. I'll do everything that's expected of me, but this… this is what I want in return. One date with a man who cherishes me. Just one.

Eric smiles, a hint of surprise mingling with his blatant excitement. He truly didn't expect me to say yes. "Let me take you to The Lacara," he says,

his words rushed.

My stomach drops, and my entire body instantly freezes. Did he say *The Lacara?*

He pauses, misinterpreting the shock I fail to hide. Eric shakes his head and smiles as he squeezes my hand. “They have a Michelin starred restaurant,” he explains. “Though I’ll gladly get a room if you’d like one.”

I force a smile despite the wild beating of my heart and avert my gaze. The Windsors own multiple hotels, and I doubt they’re ever personally present at any of them. What are the odds of running into one of the Windsor siblings at The Lacara? Probably slim to none. Logically, I know that, yet somehow, Eric’s choice feels ominous. It feels like a reminder that I can’t escape Dion, not even in these final moments with Eric. “I’d love that,” I say nonetheless, desperate for just a few more choices of my own.

His brows rise, and he throws me a mischievous look. “The restaurant or the room?” he asks, grinning.

“Both, if you’re lucky.” I’d meant it as a joke, but the way his eyes darken makes my stomach flutter. Doing something like that… it’d never even occurred to me.

Could I really sleep with him? I won’t ever see Eric again after today — I can’t risk it with Dion moving back soon, but at least I’d have a memory to carry me through the years to come. It’d be the last choice I get to make, and the thought of giving him something that Dion likely thinks he’s entitled to fills me with satisfaction.

My thoughts are still reeling by the time we walk into the hotel lobby. I can’t even fully appreciate the splendor of The Lacara, because with every step I take, I second-guess myself more.

The hotel’s expansiveness makes me nervous, and I suddenly realize how crazy this is. I’m not the kind of person that gets to chase moments of happiness, and I’m terrified. I’m scared of hurting Eric, of having to face the consequences of my actions, of the future I’ll have to embrace after today. I’m scared, and I’m tired of feeling that way.

Eric grabs my hand, and I force myself to calm down, to enjoy this last date with him. Dion has taken so much from me already, but these last few hours are mine. This might well be the last bit of freedom I’ll ever have. I can’t spend my last seconds gripped by fear.

Eric pulls my chair out for me and shoots me a worried look, but thankfully, he doesn’t say anything. I’m not sure I could explain myself if I

tried — not without ruining everything.

“I’m nervous too,” he says, misinterpreting my silence. “Somehow, this feels a little like a first date, doesn’t it?” I nod, and he reaches for my hand over the table. “I suppose in some ways, it is. I always said I’d be patient with you and that you’re worth the wait, but I feel like you may have taken those words a little too seriously,” he adds, his tone playful. “Six months before you let me take you out on a real date? It’ll be *years* before we’re married.”

My smile wavers, and I look down, unable to take the hope interlaced with flirtatiousness in his gaze. Marriage isn’t in the cards for us, and I don’t know how to tell him that. How do I tell him that this is where our story ends?

He entwines our fingers, and I look into his eyes, committing the affection in them to memory. I suppress the wave of helplessness I feel and force a smile.

“You like fish, don’t you?” he asks, pointing to a really overpriced dish on the menu. He’ll undoubtedly want to pay, and I can’t let him treat me to something like that, not when I know I’ll never get to repay him.

He sighs when I shake my head and takes the menu out of my hands. “Let me order for the both of us. Let me surprise you with something I think you’ll love.”

For a moment, I feel like arguing with him. Every fiber of my being wants to tell him I can make my own decisions, but I hold back, knowing that he isn’t my father. He isn’t trying to oppress me… he’s just trying to impress me. Today might well be the last time a man shows me any consideration at all. I’d be a fool to waste a moment like this.

My gaze roams over Eric’s face — his short blonde hair, his brown eyes, and the way he smiles at me. No one has ever looked at me the way he does, like he’s truly seeing *me*. My gaze settles on his lips, and a sharp pang of longing rushes through me. I’ll never get to kiss him again. I’ll never get to be with someone who chose to be with me, who truly wants me.

“How much does a room here cost?” I ask, the words leaving my lips before the thought has truly formed, before the consequences tied to them catch up to me.

Eric sits up straighter and tugs on the collar of his shirt. “Not that much,” he says, grinning nervously.

I smile back at him, knowing he's lying. All the Windsor hotels are five-star. I could never afford to stay at any of them. I suppose for a lawyer like Eric, it isn't quite as out of reach.

His eyes roam over my body, resting on my chest for a moment before he looks away. "I'm sure we can get dinner served in our room," he says, swallowing hard.

Knowing that he's just as nervous as I am oddly puts me at ease. He treats me with such care. Dion would never be this patient, this sweet. He'll take what he thinks I owe him, with no care for my feelings. That's what it's always been like. Whenever Dion is forced to interact with me, he does the bare minimum with no consideration of my thoughts or feelings, like he can't stand to be around me for a second longer than he has to.

I nod, suddenly sure of what I want. For years, my father carefully guarded me, keeping me from so much as befriending guys, scared I'd do something that would give Dion an excuse to break our engagement. This is my last chance to do things on my own terms. I'll be forced into marriage with a man who more often than not forgets I even exist, but this will be my choice. My virginity will be mine to give.

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Chapter Four

Dion

"Do you want me to tell you the good news or the bad news first?" Silas Sinclair, my family's Head of Security, asks.

I grip my phone tighter as I walk into The Lacara's lobby, beyond irritated by his endless games. It is my hypothesis that Silas's propensity to provide information in the most roundabout way possible stems, quite simply, from boredom. The man is so whipped by his wife that there's no room left for the kind of excitement that used to fill it. "Good," I tell him sharply.

"I found Hannah."

I pause mid-step, cold anticipation running down my spine. Ares blacklisted her after everything she did to him and his wife, Raven. The move ended her acting career prematurely and devastated her, but it isn't enough. She hasn't paid enough.

"Hannah, Raven's *sister*," he clarifies, as though I could forget who she is for even a single second. I'm not a forgiving man — I don't forget the names of those who hurt the ones I love. "The woman you asked me to find?"

Irritating. He truly is a fucking pain to deal with. Technically, Silas is only tasked with our security — both personal and cyber, but what he can't do himself, he has the right connections for. He's fucking annoying, but he's

reliable, and though I'd never admit it, he knows how to get a job done like no other.

"The bad news?"

He sighs. "She disappeared again shortly before we could apprehend her. It's obvious she's enjoying the kind of protection only money can buy. Raven's father swore that they aren't helping her, and truthfully, I can't find any proof that he's lying. Not yet, anyway."

I grit my teeth as I walk to the elevators, a hint of fury rushing down my spine. That fucking bitch. I have no idea how she continues to evade us, but it won't last long.

"I'll ask Xavier for help," I murmur. "I'm done fucking around. I'll be damned if I let her roam around like she's on an extended luxury holiday while my sister-in-law works herself to the bone to undo the damage she left behind."

Silas begins to reply, but his words fade away as my ears tune into the sound of a familiar voice nearby. *Faye*. Her laughter gets louder with each step I take toward her, and for a moment, I can't quite comprehend finding her here. "I'm going to have to call you back," I murmur, pure frost coursing through my veins as I watch a man I know all too well wrap his hand around my fiancée's waist.

My stomach drops when she smiles up at him. *Fuck*. She's never once smiled at me that way, and she looks breathtaking. She's hardly recognizable when she looks so… *happy*. What is going on here? The elevator doors open, and realization dawns. My fiancée is headed up to a room with another man.

"Eric?" I shout as I walk up to them, calculating my next moves. He looks over his shoulder and smiles when he recognizes me, but my attention is on the tiny, beautiful brunette he's holding.

Faye has her back turned to me, but I notice the way she freezes at the sound of my voice. The fact that Eric doesn't look wary can only mean he doesn't know about us, as expected. If I'd addressed her, she'd have had an opportunity to spin a tale that would excuse the circumstances I've found her in. Fuck that.

"Dion," Eric says, his tone conveying his enthusiasm. "I didn't realize you were back."

He offers me his hand, and I shake it, my grip far tighter than it needed to be. He winces and flexes his hand the moment I let go.

I watch as Eric reaches for Faye, who has yet to turn around, her gaze seemingly stuck on the elevator that has once again closed. The clues are damning, but somehow, a small part of me still hopes I'm wrong. With only a few months until our wedding, she can't seriously be doing this. My timid little fiancée wouldn't, would she?

"Honey, this is one of my clients, Dion Windsor," Eric says, pulling her closer.

I chuckle despite the white-hot anger flooding through my body, unable to help myself. Why the *fuck* is one of my family's lawyers introducing me to my own fiancée like that?

Eric turns her toward me, confusion flitting through his eyes at her reluctance, and I take my time to study her. My gaze roams over her body, taking in the way her short skirt and that silky blouse highlight her curves — all for Eric, no doubt. Her long dark hair falls to her waist in big waves that only seem to accentuate her gorgeous face, and all of a sudden, I'm hit with a desperate need to find out what those strands would feel like between my fingers. This is why I've grown increasingly fearful throughout the last few years — she's becoming harder to ignore, to *resist*.

Faye seems to just get more and more beautiful each time I see her, but her beauty has never hit me quite as hard as it does today. Perhaps it's the way that sexy full bottom lip of hers trembles, or the way she's attempting to defy the inevitable by refusing to look me in the eye. Fuck, maybe it's simply that sweet coconut scent of hers. Whatever it is has me spellbound.

"*Faye*," I murmur, her name a fucking treat on my lips. Her breath hitches, and I smile humorlessly. "What are you doing here?"

My gaze lowers to Eric's hand on her waist, and my own hands slowly curl into fists. For a moment, I wonder what it'll sound like if I break every single finger he's laid on what's *mine*, but then Faye raises those deep blue eyes of hers, and every drop of anger drains away.

With each passing second, more of her blues are drowned out by the force of her panic, but despite that, she doesn't look away. Even as a tear spills from her stunning eyes, she faces me head-on, defiance warring with her obvious fear. She's mesmerizing. I've seen her countless times throughout the years, but she's never looked at me with even a fraction of the emotions she's showing me right now. Her smiles have always been cold and distant, our conversations polite, nothing between us ever straying

beyond what's appropriate. The woman standing in front of me right now is not the girl she's had me convinced she was.

"Eric," I murmur. "How exactly do you know Faye?"

I need to know how far she's taken this. Faye doesn't owe me a single thing until we're married, but I need to know. Is this just a casual fling, or is she about to walk down the aisle wishing I was *him*?

"She's my girlfriend," he says, his voice soft, perturbed, as though he's finally realized something is wrong.

My stomach twists painfully, yet I don't look away. Neither does she. I watch as guilt dances in her eyes, her breathing coming quicker as she succumbs to the panic that is so obviously seizing her.

"Faye, what's wrong?" Eric asks, his tone caring, concerned. He brushes her hair out of her face, unaware that his actions propel her further toward a panic attack.

She gasps for air, and a tear runs down her cheek. *Fuck*. This situation should have been a relief — an escape, a reason to keep her at bay even once we're married. So why do I find myself reaching for her, angling my body so I'm standing between the two of them? Why do I find myself cupping her face, my touch more tender than I thought myself capable of?

"I've got you," I murmur, my voice soft and carefully controlled. I gently slide a hand into her hair before tipping her head up to face me. She's so fucking tiny, and she's never looked more breakable.

Her gaze lands on mine, but she struggles to focus on me, to regain control over her body. "Breathe for me, sweetheart," I plead, my guilt eating at me. I'm already infecting her — I'm the reason she's in this state. I should've handled this situation with more care, but I let my anger and indignation take over. "You're fine, Faye," I whisper, as though I can wish it into existence.

Her breathing becomes less labored, her body relaxing against me as she finally manages to focus. "*Dion*," she whispers, her voice breaking.

I hold her just like that, one hand in her hair and the other cupping her cheek, my eyes on hers as she finally breathes in deeply.

Eric attempts to reach for her, and I pull her closer, unwilling to let her go — *unable to*. "Faye," I say, my tone brooking no argument. "Are you going to tell him, or should I?"

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Chapter Five

Dion

The sound of Faye's sorrow fills the bedroom in my suite, each choked back sob another vicious stab at my heart. I always knew I'd make her cry, but I never realized how deep those tears would cut.

My gaze roams over the woman seated at the edge of my bed, her previously perfect makeup smudged, and her golden skin a few shades paler than usual. Faye has the most beautiful blue eyes I've ever seen, but today they're filled with nothing but sorrow and guilt.

She keeps running her hand through her long dark hair, messing it up. I've never seen her so *undone*. It hurts to look at her, but I can't tear my eyes away. She's stunning, even now.

Clearly, I'm not the only one who thinks so.

Eric is probably pacing in my suite's seating area, needing an explanation she doesn't want to give. I'm not sure what I was expecting from her when we barely speak, but I certainly wasn't expecting her to be dating someone mere months before our wedding.

I walk toward her, and her head snaps up, her tear-stained eyes meeting mine. "Faye," I murmur, my heart aching at the sight of her. Never before has she shown me such raw, unfiltered emotions. It's ironic that the first time I'm seeing them is because of someone else. It's almost like the universe is telling me that I don't even deserve her tears, let alone her smiles — like I didn't already fucking know that. Perhaps equally ironic is

the fact I'm only here because my home is being renovated in preparation for our wedding. It's being renovated for *her*. This entire situation fills me with a kind of bitterness that nearly fucking wrecks me.

I kneel in front of her and place my hands on my bed, either side of her hips. She inhales shakily, pure unadulterated heartbreak in her gaze as she lifts her face. Fuck, I could drown in her eyes if I'm not careful.

Another tear rolls down her cheek, and her lashes flutter closed. I sigh and reach for her, noting the way her body tenses as I gently cup her cheek with my right hand, my thumb brushing away her tears. "Look at me," I plead.

She does as I ask, revealing her vulnerability, her pain. "Dion," she whispers, her voice breaking. *Fuck*. "I'm s-so sorry."

I use my free hand to move her hair out of her face, unable to suppress my desire to touch her, to console her. "You have nothing to be sorry for," I reassure her, though the words taste like fucking cardboard on my tongue. "We aren't quite married yet, and our engagement is hardly conventional. You don't owe me anything — not yet."

She inhales shakily, a fresh wave of tears escaping her eyes. My heart wrenches, and I act entirely on instinct when I carefully thread a hand through her hair before pulling her against me. Faye falls apart in my embrace, her knees pressed against my ribs and her face nestled against my neck.

"I sh-should've known b-better," she sobs. Faye quivers against me as she loses control over her emotions, and I try my best to hold her together. She was never meant to affect me in this way, yet here I am, on my knees for her, desperate to take away her pain.

I hold her against me until her sobs come less frequently, her breathing a little steadier. My hands wrap around her shoulders, and I gently push her back until she's sitting upright again, my need to look her in the eye greater than my desire to hold her close.

"How long has this been going on?" I ask, unable to keep the question buried. Her answer won't make a difference, but I need to know. Why, I'm not quite sure.

Faye flinches and looks away, as though she can't bear to face me. "It's not what you think," she tells me, her voice catching on the last word. Her arms wrap around herself, and my heart stirs, yet my anger is far from appeased.

“It’s not what I think?” I repeat. “So you aren’t dating one of my family’s lawyers?” Eric and I aren’t as close as we were when we were younger, but once upon a time, I’d have called him a friend.

She parts her lips to answer me, and my gaze drops to her mouth. The mere thought of Eric having kissed those pretty pouty lips of hers when I never have… *fuck*. Why the fuck did it have to be someone I know?

“Does your father know about this?” I ask, unease running down my spine. How the fuck did this happen without me realizing? I might not know Faye as well as I should, but I do know she’s always been meek and obedient in her father’s presence. It’s what made me underestimate her.

Fear flashes through her eyes, and she instantly shakes her head. The fact that she’s here at all, behind his back, means she’s willing to go quite far for Eric. The thought of that is accompanied by an unfamiliar ache that reeks of… *jealousy*.

“Were you planning to run off with him?” The mere thought of it makes my blood boil. I spent so much time convincing myself that I didn’t want her, I never realized how often she’s on my mind.

“No,” Faye says, reaching for me. She places a hand on my bicep, and I wonder if she’s aware that this might very well be the first time she’s taken the initiative to touch me in any way. “It’s not… that’s not… I was going to end things with him today. I knew you were moving back soon, so I…”

I stare at her, trying to determine whether she’s being truthful. That torment in her eyes, the sincerity. I doubt she’s faking that, yet her story doesn’t add up.

“It certainly didn’t look like you were about to break up with him,” I murmur, keeping a lid on my venom. “If anything, it looked an awful lot like you were on your way up to do something else altogether.” My stomach twists at the thought of her underneath Eric. How many times has he had her? I grit my teeth and push the mental image away, lest it consume me.

“It really isn’t what you think. We…” her voice trails off, as though she’s all out of excuses.

I reach for her and wrap my hands around her waist, catching her by surprise. Her eyes widen, and a humorless smile tugs at my lips as my palms slide down to her thighs. I part them and watch her black skirt ride up before pulling her closer, until she’s seated right at the edge of the bed, her thighs bracketing my waist and her face mere inches from mine. I’ve never

had her so close, never in such an intimate position, but it feels right. It takes the edge off my unease, though it's not quite enough.

"Faye, were you on your way up to fuck him, or not?" I ask, my voice rough, pained. My gaze travels back up to her eyes, and the guilt I see in them fuels my torment. "Answer me."

I watch her throat move as she swallows, her breathing quicker than it was moments ago. "Yes. Yes, I was."

Her words fucking wreck me, and the way she looks at me tells me she knows it. Would it have hurt less if it hadn't been someone I know? If I'd never had to see her with him? It's true that I've been avoiding our marriage, but it wasn't because I didn't want her. I've never fucking *dated* anyone else, and I've certainly never imagined myself married to anyone but her. I've been so caught up in my shame and guilt that it hadn't occurred to me that my coldness would push her into someone else's arms.

"Dion," she whispers, placing her hand on my chest. I glance down at her empty ring finger, something akin to remorse washing over me. I spent so much time running away from her I didn't consider what my absence would invite. Hardly anyone knows I'm even engaged, much less to whom. I should've put a noticeable engagement ring on her finger, like my grandmother told me to.

I watch her as she tries to gather her courage. She straightens her back a little, and that fire in her eyes blazes a little brighter. Does she have any idea how fucking mesmerizing she is? Somehow, I doubt it.

"I've seen the British gossip articles about you," she murmurs eventually, her jaws clenching for a moment. I tense, and my first instinct is to refute her words. I haven't been with anyone else since she turned eighteen, but admitting that would invite far too many questions that I don't have an answer to. "We never promised each other fidelity," she continues. "Matter of fact — we've never promised each other anything at all." She's so fucking tiny, yet she doesn't look the least intimidated. Where has that ardor been all these years?

Faye's always reminded me of a porcelain doll — beautiful, but devoid of emotions. Every interaction I've ever had with her seemed eerily practiced, robotic even. I now realize she's been putting on an act for me, hiding the best parts of herself. What I don't understand is *why*.

"Is that so?" I murmur, my gaze roaming over her face as I grab her waist, my thumbs drawing circles over the silky material of her blouse. I've

never touched her so intimately before. Even when we danced at the events we've attended together over the years, we were both detached, playing our roles. This moment… it's different, and we both know it. "Last I checked, you promised me your hand in marriage."

Her breath hitches, and her gorgeous eyes widen a fraction. "I did nothing of the sort." Her voice is soft, pained. "Our marriage agreement was made by our families. Neither of us had anything to do with it, and I'm pretty sure neither of us *wants* anything to do with it either."

She stares up at me, and I'm fucking captivated. My usually numb heart is aching in a way I never thought it could, and for the life of me, I can't look away. So this is what my future wife looks like when she isn't acting.

"Do you really think I want to marry a man who couldn't care less about me?" she asks, indignation chiseled into her expression. "I'm pretty sure you changed your phone number weeks ago and never even bothered to tell me. You drew a line between us, Dion, and I stayed firmly on my side."

I flinch involuntarily, unable to deny her words. She's right. A few weeks ago, I switched my UK number to a US number, and I never told her. It just… hadn't occurred to me. She and I never talk, after all. I can count the times she's called me on one hand.

"I'll admit, I fucked up there," I concede. "Don't you think I realize I have no grounds to stand on? I know I barely paid you any mind throughout our engagement, but that doesn't mean I'll turn a blind eye to whatever the fuck is going on here."

My gaze roams over her face, and she gasps when my thumb brushes over her bottom lip. So fucking soft. What will she taste like when I finally get to have her to myself? I'm the last person that deserves to have any part of her, yet here I am, about to take more from her than I already have.

"This thing between you and him ends now." The despair in her eyes fucking guts me, yet I forge ahead. "I can't share you, Faye. I won't. Either you end our engagement, or you end things with him right here, right now. What is it going to be?"

She's as capable of breaking this engagement as I am — that is, not at all. The ultimatum I'm giving her is an empty one, born of unwarranted ruthlessness and ire. This is exactly what I've always feared. My guilt toward her doesn't outweigh my need to possess her, and it should. Fuck, it should.

Her eyes fall closed, and she chokes back a sob. It fucking kills me, and for a moment, my resolve wavers. Could I live like that? Could I turn a blind eye if it'll bring her happiness?

My gaze roams over her body, and I clench my jaw. *No*. I can't bear the thought of her coming home to me after being with someone else. I wish I was a better man, but I'm not, and I never will be. I know I don't deserve it, but if she is to be my wife, I want all of her. That's always been the problem — I'm a selfish fucking monster.

Faye looks into my eyes and takes a deep breath. "I'll end it," she whispers, and relief rushes through me.

"Good," I tell her, my tone harsh. "Let me be clear, Faye. From now on, you are mine as much as I am yours. Don't you dare so much as *dream* of pulling this shit again."

Her expression shifts into something I can't quite decipher, and I find myself wanting to unravel her and discover the parts she tries to hide. "One chance," I murmur. "I'll only give you one chance. I'll forget this ever happened and won't mention it to your father, but in return, you won't speak to Eric after today. Deal?"

She nods and averts her gaze, but fails to hide her heartbreak. She doesn't have to say the words for me to know that she loves him. She'll break up with him because she has no other choice, and she'll always resent me for it. It'll be yet another item on the list of grievances she'll end up creating.

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Chapter Six

FAYE

I stand behind the curtain on stage and stare at the packed room, my sorrow weighing heavy on me. Every time I think I'm okay, something reminds me of Eric, and my heart breaks all over again. It's been nearly two weeks since I ended things with him, and true to my word, I haven't spoken to him since. It kills me that I never got a chance to explain. The moment I told him we were through, he walked out, almost like he thought he could make the words disappear by doing so.

He's called me every day since, but I'd be a fool to pick up. One chance is all Dion gave me, and even that was undeserved mercy. I'm terrified of what he might do if I were to speak to Eric. Between my father and Dion, I'm trapped between two evils. I can't tell which of the two is the lesser one. Perhaps they are equal in their need to suppress my voice, my needs.

I sigh and smooth out my hair, ensuring not a single strand is out of place ahead of my performance. Every second of every day, I'm expected to play my part in a story I have no say over. The perfect daughter, the perfect Windsor wife. Being with Eric felt freeing, and that feeling was addictive. I'm not sure how to hold on without those little moments between us that felt real in a world that's designed to deceive.

In the weeks since our breakup I've second-guessed myself countless times, continuously wondering whether I should go to the coffeeshop in

hopes that he might be there, waiting for an explanation. But then I remember Dion's warning, and my courage fails me.

"Faye," my father says, his voice soft but threatening. I turn toward him and keep my face perfectly blank, a hint of fear running down my spine. "Do not mess this up," he hisses, his hand wrapping around my arm. I bite back a whimper when his nails dig into my skin and stare at my shoes, my mood plummeting further. Some days, merely existing seems too hard, and today definitely is one of those days. "Your performance at practice has been subpar all week. Don't you dare embarrass me tonight."

He seems more anxious than usual, and I can't quite figure out why. I perform at least once a month, and I've never failed him before — not with this. Playing the piano has always been my escape. I've always found solace in the way my fingers fly over the keys.

A certain amount of control is required to play at the level I've mastered, and I've always taken pride in that. The only time I truly feel in charge is when I'm performing. The moment I start playing, no one has the ability to command anything of me, not even my father. It's only then that I'm truly in my element. I might falter during practice, but never on stage, and Father knows it.

I nod nonetheless, breathing a sigh of relief when the stagehand gestures for me to go on. The crowd applauds, but the spotlight blinds me to them. From the sounds of it, hundreds of people have gathered to hear me play tonight, and it humbles me endlessly. I wonder if they realize that they're the ones who maintain my sanity. Without this, I'd drown in my sorrows.

I lightly trace my fingers over the ivories, my mood mellowing. My performances usually last an hour and a half, and I always love every single second, because every one of those minutes is truly mine. I hope it's no different tonight.

I smile as I decide to take a risk and veer off-course, playing something other than what I'm supposed to. I know my father won't like that, because it isn't what the crowd expects, but it's what I need tonight. For once, I'd like to play for myself on stage. I know I'll pay for having the audacity to make a choice of my own, for acting on impulse, but I think it's worth it. Desperation claws at me so fiercely tonight that there's nothing I won't do just to feel alive for a few minutes.

I hear a few soft gasps from the front row as I begin to play Ravel's *Gaspard de la nuit*, but then everything fades away, until it's just me and

the beautiful Steinway I have the honor of playing tonight. This specific piece is so difficult to play that it requires all of my concentration, and for a little while, my thoughts finally still. For seven minutes, the heartache fades away, and I stop worrying about what the future might bring.

I wish the relief could last longer than that.

Applause brings me back to the present, and I notice I'm trembling, my face wet with tears that I didn't realize had fallen. I inhale shakily as I dab at the wet streaks, praying no one noticed.

I steal a glance at the audience, only to be captured by the same deep green eyes that have haunted both my dreams and nightmares in recent days. Dion. He stares back at me from the front row, looking completely captivated.

He's never seen me play before. I'm not sure he even realized that I'm a pianist, even though he was the reason I was forced to learn. He's never taken an interest in me before, so why now? I wish he'd continue to treat me the way he used to. I don't want his attention. I don't want to be on yet another powerful man's radar, for him to direct as he pleases. I don't want to dance to his tune, so I turn back to my piano and play my own. It's a small act of defiance, but it's all I've got.

My father will be furious, and I risk disappointing the crowd too, since this isn't what they came to hear, but I start to play the first movement of Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata*. Once more, I manage to forget about Dion, even if it's only for a few minutes.

It's a futile endeavor, because the moment the last note rings through the air, my despair comes back to taunt me. Even from here, I can feel Dion's burning gaze, and no matter how hard I try, I can't keep myself from wondering what he might be doing here.

Did he change his mind about keeping quiet, or is he just keeping tabs on me? I can't determine his motivations, and that unnerves me. My father is predictable, and there's a certain measure of solace in that. I prefer to know when to expect pain — it allows me to take calculated risks.

I'm on edge throughout the rest of the show, my disappointment in myself only perturbing me further. The audience deserves my very best, and I'm withholding that from them because I'm failing to put my emotions aside.

Thankfully, the applause is still thunderous once I bow to them, conveying my gratitude. Instinctively, my eyes land on Dion's seat, relief

rushing through me when I find it empty. If only that feeling could've lasted a little longer than the few minutes it takes me to walk to my dressing room.

"Faye."

I freeze in the doorway, the door half open and my hand still on the doorknob. I should've known he wouldn't just have left. There's no way I could be that lucky. Dion smiles as he leans back against my vanity, his arms crossed, and I take a moment to study him. Even through the clearly expensive three-piece suit, his muscles are obvious. He's at least a foot taller than me, and I have no doubt that he could easily hurt me if he wanted to. Will he? Something about him makes me want to put my trust in him, and I'm not sure why. Perhaps it's the fact that he easily could've struck me at The Lacara, yet he didn't. His words were harsh, but his touch was entirely in contrast to it. It was almost as though a small part of him recognized how close to breaking I truly am.

My father throws me a stern look from beside Dion, and I snap out of it as I walk into the room, letting the door fall closed behind me.

"Please excuse us, Jimmy," Dion tells my father curtly, his eyes never leaving mine.

Father looks startled for a moment, but then he smiles politely and walks toward me, throwing me a warning look as he brushes past. I've never seen him cower like that, not even for a single moment, and it brings me a perverse sense of gratification.

I'm hesitant as I walk further into the room. It suddenly seems so much smaller than before, with Dion's large frame taking up most of the space. He pushes off my vanity and meets me halfway, his gaze unyielding.

"You were magnificent," he murmurs, surprising me. I tense when he raises his hand and brushes the tips of his fingers over my cheek. "I should've brought you flowers, but I only just made it in time."

I will myself to bite my tongue, but my resentment for him overpowers my need for self-preservation. "You needn't have come. I wasn't expecting you," I tell him, the contempt in my tone blatant. Why is it that I'm struggling to control my tongue around him these days, when I've always excelled at it?

He smiles and cups my cheek, his thumb brushing over my lips. "Yet here I am, my darling fiancée. I had to come and check if you've been a good girl for me." I stare up at him, a hint of defiance taking root in my

heart. I don’t let it blossom. “Have you, Faye? Have you been a good girl? Did you keep your word?”

I let my eyes fall closed and take a shaky breath. “Yes,” I say reluctantly. “I haven’t spoken to Eric.”

Dion pushes his thumb against my lips, and I gasp, accidentally letting his finger slip into my mouth. My tongue brushes against it, and his eyes darken. “I don’t want his name on your lips,” he warns.

I wonder if he provokes me on purpose, but that can’t be, can it? A man like Dion Windsor wouldn’t waste time playing petty games with someone like me. My teeth graze against his thumb, and I bite him lightly, wishing I had the courage to do some real damage.

He smirks, looking oddly pleased. “Fucking adorable,” he murmurs. “I can’t wait to find out how you taste, Faye.”

My eyes widen, and he pulls his hand away, grinning wickedly. If I were more courageous, I’d slap that grin right off his handsome face.

“I probably won’t see you again until our annual charity gala next month. Something came up at work, and I have to travel back to London for a few weeks. Keep being good for me while I’m away, baby,” he murmurs. “I’ll make it worth your while.”

What does that mean? I frown at him, but he doesn’t offer any further explanations. He just takes my hand and slowly raises it to his lips, kissing my knuckles, his eyes on mine.

I can’t read him, no matter how hard I try. Yet somehow, I have no doubt that whatever I’d find behind those deep green eyes would only unsettle me further.

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Chapter Seven

Dion

I put my phone on loudspeaker as I pace through my suite, unable to temper my agitation. I hate having to leave, and I blame Faye for my reluctance. *Out of sight, out of mind*, and all that shit. It worked in my favor until it didn't. The mere thought of her using my absence as an excuse to contact Eric makes me fucking seethe.

"Dion, you alright?" Xavier asks.

I glance back at my phone and sigh. "Yeah," I murmur. "I'm fine, Xave. Just eager to get this done."

He falls silent for a moment. "Nah," he says. "You've barely heard a word I said. You've been looking for Hannah for months, and I just told you I've got her locked up in one of my warehouses in Spain, but you barely responded."

"That's not true," I tell him, but my reply lacks conviction. "I'm getting on a plane tomorrow morning, aren't I?" I vaguely recall him filling me in on how Silas found her and gave him the details, after which he apprehended her. Silas is my point of contact for everything I can legally do, after which I tend to turn to Xavier.

The Kingstons have never minded getting their hands dirty. Quite frankly, their moves into politics and their attempts to become upright citizens endlessly amuse me. Unlike the Windsors, they aren't known for

their morals. While we tend to be happy with profit and prestige, they're after the kind of power that corrupts, and they don't care what it takes.

Xavier chuckles knowingly, and the sound grates on me. "It's Faye, isn't it?" he asks, sounding entirely too fucking delighted. Calling me out on my lies has been his favorite hobby since we were kids. We've been friends ever since we found ourselves at the same prestigious boarding school, both of us running from our own demons — though I suspect that even without that commonality, we'd have become friends.

"Fuck off," I snap, unwilling to discuss her, but that only makes him laugh harder. Over the years, he's become family, and he takes full advantage of that knowledge. He knows only he and my brothers would get away with bringing her up like that. I should've known better than to get drunk and tell them about Faye and Eric at poker night last week. I should've known they wouldn't just let it be.

"You Windsor men," he tuts. "Before you know it, you'll be attending poker night with a sour face, every other sentence out of your mouth containing the words *my wife*."

I grimace at the way we always mock Ares and Luca, suddenly somewhat remorseful. I finally get it. The thought of calling Faye my *wife* fills me with a sick satisfaction. Thoughts of her still fill me with shame and regret, but there's more to it now — I'm endlessly captivated by that blazing fire I saw in her eyes, both at The Lacara when she called me out on the gossip papers and changing my phone number, and again in her dressing room.

For years, she seemed to be devoid of a personality at all. Now I realize she's just been hiding who she truly is, and I can feel myself growing obsessed with luring out the real her. When her eyes flash with indignation, and that helplessness I've come to recognize fades away, she becomes an irresistible creature that I want to unravel. Feeding my addiction would be dangerous, *reckless*, but I don't think I have the power to resist. In part, this is why I stayed away from her — because there's something about her that speaks to me.

"Whatever," I mutter belatedly, earning myself another chuckle.

"Fine," he says, "just tell me what to do with Hannah."

I pause as I mull it over. "Just leave her locked up for a week while I finalize some work. I want to see who comes for her. She's definitely got someone's protection. If she goes missing for a week, we should be able to

figure out who it is. They'll become increasingly agitated and they'll slip up. If they do, I'll wipe them out. They're fucking fools for not taking a Windsor Kiss of Death seriously."

Xavier whistles. "*Nice*. Alright, you got it. I'll send you the address, but you owe me one."

I sigh. "You Kingstons and your favors."

Xavier laughs. "Don't worry," he says. "I already know how I'm going to cash this one in. It'll be invaluable for me, but easy for you."

I'm about to retort on that bullshit statement when the doorbell in my suite rings. I'm apprehensive as I end the call and stroll over to the door, only to find my four brothers standing in the hallway, big smiles on their faces. "Nope," I say, before trying to slam the door in Ares's face.

He catches the door before it closes and forces his way in, ignoring my attempts to shut him out. "What a warm welcome," he says, his eyes roaming over my suite.

"I have an early flight tomorrow," I warn. "Whatever this is, I don't have time for it."

For them to come by unannounced means they're up to some kind of bullshit. My siblings and I are very close, but we try our best to keep some boundaries intact. Even more so following Ares and Luca's weddings. The fact that all four of them are here does not bode well for me.

"*Nice*," Luca says, following Ares in. "Love the setup," he adds, tipping his head toward the desk in the living room.

"Thanks," Zane says dryly, throwing Luca a withering glare. "You do realize this is *my* hotel, right? Not Dion's."

"Can't believe you guys didn't even hold the fucking door for me," Lex shouts, wheeling in what appears to be a whiteboard.

What the fuck? Ares hooks his arm around my neck and drags me to the sofa. "Best to get it over with," he mutters. "You know what Zane and Lex get like when they have an idea. Luca and I tried to talk them out of it, but that wasn't happening, so the best I can do is damage control. They've… had a few drinks."

I look up at my eldest brother, and he throws me a reassuring smile before forcing me to sit on the sofa. I sigh as I lean back and watch Lex set up his whiteboard, which, upon further inspection, appears to be some kind of smart device.

He powers it on, and my eyes widen as the words *How to win over Faye* come into view. “Hell no,” I murmur, trying to stand up, but Ares throws his arm around my shoulder and keeps me seated.

Luca nods in sympathy and hands me a whisky, a knowing look in his eyes. “You’ll need this,” he says, shaking his head. “Lex made a presentation.”

Fuck no. I tip back the glass, and Luca instantly refills it, his face filled with pity. Sierra is the craziest of our siblings, but Lex isn’t far behind. I need an excuse to get out of here.

“I thought today would be the perfect day to test out this prototype of my new smart board. I’m thinking of calling it the Lexperience,” Lex says.

“No,” Zane groans. “Fuck that.”

“The *Lex-board*,” Lexington counters.

“Absolutely not,” Luca objects.

Lex nods at me then, and I can’t help but smile. This is fucking ridiculous, and they know it. Just how much did I worry them at poker night? I must’ve been more of a wreck than I realized if they felt the need to do all of this. This is exactly what I want to protect. This bond, this unwavering and unconditional support. It’s why I move in the shadows, so my siblings can stay and bask in the light, where they’re meant to be.

“The name is a work-in-progress, but it works pretty flawlessly.” He taps it, and his slideshow starts. This is some of the cringiest shit I’ve ever seen, but I know it comes from a good place, so I sit back and keep my mouth shut. This kinda thing is as much for them as it is for me — they feel better when they believe they’re helping, even though their endless meddling often only makes things worse.

“We can’t deny that you completely fucking ignored Faye for years,” Lex says, slurring his words slightly. Just how much has he had to drink already? “In your defense, she was a literal child for most of your engagement, so I think it can be forgiven. However, you now have competition that you wouldn’t have had if you’d at least acknowledged her existence.”

He stares at me as though he’s expecting me to engage with his words, so I nod reluctantly. “Right,” I murmur, even though I disagree. Eric is no competition for me — I just need to make her see that.

Lex smiles and swipes the screen, pulling up a new slide. “If you want your inheritance, you’ll need her to remain faithful to you while you’re

married, or you'll breach Grandma's terms. You know what that means, right? You need to steal her away from her boyfriend. Just because she broke up with him doesn't mean she'll stay away from him."

"Her *ex*," I correct, my tone harsh. Just hearing him call Eric her boyfriend fucking pisses me off. "And I'm pretty fucking certain she'll stay away from that fucker."

Ares glances at me, the edges of his lips tipping up into a smile. Thankfully, he doesn't say anything. Meanwhile, Lex stares at me blankly for a moment. "Maybe, but we can't really risk her simply keeping her word. You need to take action." He taps against his screen and grins. "Based on conversations I've had with Ares and Luca, I've come to the conclusion that the easiest way to win her over is to seduce her."

I stare at the screen wide-eyed. Is he for real? Luca and Ares both clear their throats awkwardly. "It's true though," Ares mutters. "Win over her body and her heart will follow."

Luca nods. "Yep. So long as she wants you, there's hope."

I bury my face in my hands and inhale deeply. They can't be serious. How the fuck do I get out of this situation? I have every intention of seducing Faye, but I'm certainly not going to sit here and discuss that with my brothers. I've already started to wonder whether her eyes will burn the same when she comes for me, but they definitely don't need to know that.

My doorbell rings again, and I jump up in relief, desperate for salvation. If I'm quick, I might just be able to run out and leave my brothers here. By the time Lex sobers up, he'll forget about his… *plan*.

All of my hopes are dashed when I open the door to find Sierra, Raven, and Val staring back at me. My sister holds up a bottle of tequila and grins.

Fucking great. This evening just got ten times worse. The fact that they're here can only mean that Luca and Ares told their wives what happened with Eric, and they, in turn, told Sierra. *Fuck*.

"What are you guys doing here?" Sierra asks as she walks into the living room. Raven and Val stare at their husbands, their brows raised. Neither Ares nor Luca can quite look them in the eye. I'm not sure what exactly is going on, but at least I'm no longer the only one suffering here.

Raven walks up to Ares and slides onto his lap, the two of them having an entire conversation with nothing but their eyes. His hand wraps around her waist instantly, and he presses a soft kiss to her cheek. A pang of envy hits me square in the chest at the sight of them.

Val seats herself on Luca's knee, and he throws her a sweet smile that's so unlike him that I nearly do a double-take. "Thought you said you were going to Zane's house tonight?" she murmurs.

He gently runs a hand through her hair, as though he can't keep himself from touching her. "Yeah," he murmurs. "That's what I thought I was doing when I left the office."

She chuckles knowingly and turns to look at Lex, who smiles back at her sheepishly. I want that. Luca didn't even tell her what happened, but she figured it out with a few words, simply because she knows him and our family that well.

"I see we all had the same idea," Sierra says as she sits down on the sofa's armrest, her eyes on Lex's presentation. "Good thing we came," she adds, grinning at Val. "These idiots are clearly thinking with their dicks." She looks at me then, her expression spelling trouble. "You wanna know how to win Faye over? Ask a woman — or even better, ask a woman who reads romance novels like it's her profession."

I hold my hands up and shake my head. "I do not want to win Faye over," I deny. "I had nothing to do with this."

Raven stares at me and shakes her head. "Liar," she murmurs, her expression serious. I can't hold her gaze when she looks at me like that. Raven has always seen straight through me.

She's always been as much of a sister to me as Sierra is, and I can't help but wonder what she'd say if she found out about Hannah. Would she feel avenged, or would she think me twisted and cruel? If they truly knew me, would any of the people in this room want me anywhere near Faye?

"Let's start with Faye's interests," Val says, and I grab the bottle of tequila Sierra brought. This is bound to be a long and painful night. At least the liquor will make tomorrow's flight easier.

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Chapter Eight

FAYE

I stare at myself in the large mirrors inside Raven Windsor's bridal boutique, my heart hollow. There's no denying that the wedding dress my stylist chose for me is beautiful, but it isn't *me*. The intricate beading and heavy lace look priceless, and it's exactly the kind of thing a Windsor bride would wear.

I should be beyond grateful to be standing here in this dress, but each time I've walked into this boutique, I haven't been able to look away from the far simpler long-sleeved silky wedding gown displayed in the corner. Its sleeves and beautiful deep neckline are made with the same signature Raven Windsor lace and beading, but everything else about it is just luxury silk falling in the most beautiful folds I've ever seen. I'd give the world to just try it on. If I'd ever been allowed to come here by myself, I would've asked to, even if it's just so I could pretend I'm a normal bride for a few moments.

Had it been Eric I was marrying, that's what I would've chosen to wear. When I close my eyes and let reality fade away, I can imagine the way he'd look standing at the end of the aisle, his eyes filled with love and surprise as I walk up to him in the dress of my dreams.

My heart constricts painfully as my fantasies melt together with my memories, until that look in his eyes is identical to the one he wore when I ended things — disbelief followed by heartbreak, until it finally morphed

into helplessness. He looked at me as though he was hoping it was all an elaborate joke, and I wish it had been. If I could take it all back, I would.

"Raven really wanted to be here today," Brianna, the store attendant, says as she walks up to me, a regretful look in her eyes. "She wanted to help you herself and be here for every one of your fittings, but her schedule is so packed that we're having a hard time making it work."

She shoots Abigail a similar apologetic look, and my stepmother steps in to speak to her, reassuring her that it's fine before I have a chance to form my own reply.

Truthfully, I'm glad Raven isn't here. She's Dion's eldest brother's wife, and she intimidates me endlessly. When she looks at me, it's almost like she sees my insecurities and fears. I'm always scared I'll do or say the wrong thing in her presence. It's one of the reasons I'm oddly grateful my father has kept me away from the Windsors for so long.

Every week, without fail, I'm invited to dinner at Dion's grandmother's house, but my father managed to fill my evenings with piano, dance, etiquette or elocution classes. I've always had an excuse ready to reject their invites, but I'll have to face them soon. Being around the Windsors will make them realize how unsuited I am to be Dion's wife, and I'm not sure how to prevent that.

Raven is a famous model and designer, while Valentina, Luca's wife, is the COO of Windsor Finance. They're both so powerful in their own right, and I could never measure up. I'm scared standing next to them will make the difference all the more obvious, and I'm not sure how Dion might respond to that kind of embarrassment. Powerful men rarely handle any level of humiliation well.

"It truly is a beautiful dress," Abigail murmurs. "You're beyond lucky that the Windsors are buying this for you, you know? There's a waitlist of two years for a *Raven Windsor* wedding gown."

Lucky. I suppose in some ways I am, yet it doesn't feel that way. The wedding planning has made my family forget I had no choice in this union. Maybe it's just easier for them to pretend this is all real, that I'm just a girl eager for her wedding day. It's not uncommon for me to daydream about a different future, so maybe they're doing the same. Maybe this is just how they're coping.

Chloe gasps and reaches for me, her hand wrapping around my wrist. "Have you seen this?" she asks, holding up her phone. I take it from her

with a frown, my stomach dropping at the sight of the photo The Herald published.

Dion was photographed smiling up at his secretary, Maria, on a beach in Spain. They look happy and relaxed, and based on their swimwear, I assume they were very much *not* working. They weren't caught in a compromising position, but it was enough for the media to spin tales about how he'll follow in his brother's footsteps by marrying his secretary, and how they can all hear wedding bells.

"Didn't he tell you he was going to London for work? He's neither in London, nor is he working," Chloe says, her eyes blazing with excitement, as though she's unraveled some kind of wild plot. "I thought it was so weird that he'd tell you he was leaving in person when he's clearly never cared about you before, but it looks like it was just to throw you off his scent or something. He probably didn't want you to suspect the truth."

My hand trembles as I hand back her phone. It's only a matter of time before my father sees these articles, and he'll definitely blame me for Dion's behavior. It had never actually occurred to me that his fears might not be unfounded. I never considered that Dion might have someone he loves too, that I might be standing in the way of *his* happiness.

My heart clenches painfully as a new kind of helplessness washes over me. He told me he was as much mine as I am his, and though I hadn't been consciously aware of it, a small part of me foolishly believed him. He'd convinced me that at least to some degree, I'd been wrong about him. It should bring me relief to find out that his words were as empty as I thought them to be, but somehow, it just hurts.

For a single moment, he'd given me hope — hope that our future wouldn't be filled with betrayal and me having to turn a blind eye. We might never have found love together, but I'd hoped that at the very least, there'd be honesty between us. It hurts to know I can't even expect that much from him.

Abigail wordlessly raises her arm to adjust something on my dress, and her sleeve moves, revealing a blue bruise on her wrist. My heart drops at the sight of it, and my eyes meet her fear-filled ones.

I thought he'd stopped hurting her now the wedding date has been set. He seemed calmer lately, but was that only because the anger he usually reserves for me transferred to Abigail?

I've done my best to ensure he's had nothing to complain about. I've kept quiet and played the extra concerts he planned in suddenly, despite the additional strain it's put on my fingers and wrists. I've been extra careful with my replies each time the Windsors asked for my opinion on anything, because he told me he didn't want me making any choices at all, and I've been reporting every single interaction with Grandma Anne back to him, like he ordered me to.

If that wasn't enough, then what will he do to us when he sees the articles about Dion and Maria? "Are you sure money will change everything?" I ask, my voice soft.

Abigail's head snaps up, and she looks into my eyes, seemingly caught off-guard. "Yes," she says, but she no longer sounds as sure as she used to. "Of course it will."

I hadn't considered what might happen once I'm no longer around to bear the brunt of my father's anger. Will it shift to Chloe? With Linda away at college, it'll be just Abigail and Chloe in the house. I'm getting married to protect the girls, but what if my absence ends up harming them more? So far, he's spared Linda and Chloe, but will that last?

Abigail continues to touch my dress aimlessly. "Just do this for me, please. I know it'll change everything. You don't remember how he used to be, but I do." She takes a step back and raises her head to look at me. "Once our debts are paid off, I'll put him in rehab. He'll resist, I'm sure, but I know he loves me. The man he is now… that's not really him. It's the liquor that's making him act that way. Deep down, he's still a good man. *He is*. Besides, your marriage will pay for Linda and Chloe's schooling, and it'll open so many opportunities for all three of you. Just trust me, Faye. Everything will get better once you're married."

I nod, willing myself to believe her and failing. I'm well-acquainted with fear, yet I've never been more scared of the future than I am right now.

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Chapter Nine

Dion

I park in front of Xavier's warehouse and stare at my phone, overcome with an urge I've never had before. For years, I kept Faye off my mind easily, yet now I can't go two seconds without thinking of her. Was it the vulnerability she showed me when she fell apart in my arms, or was it the defiance in her eyes as she bit down on my thumb? Maybe it was a little bit of both. Somewhere along the way, Faye broke something inside me, invading my carefully controlled thoughts whenever I least expected it, and she doesn't even realize it.

I give in and call her, all the while refusing to analyze my need to hear her voice. She picks up almost instantly, her tone conveying her confusion. "Hi, this is Faye," she says, clearly not recognizing my number.

I smirk and lean back in my seat, my head against the headrest. "Hi, this is your fiancé," I reply, my tone amused.

Her breath hitches, and my cock jumps to attention. Those little gasps of hers drive me wild, and it's fucking ridiculous, because I haven't even kissed her yet. What is it about her that I find so endlessly fascinating? What is it that makes me unable to stay away when I had no problems doing so for *years?*

"D-Dion," she stammers.

I chuckle, unable to help myself. I wish I could see her face right now. I should've video called her instead. It will be evening for her now, and I

love the idea of watching her lying back in bed.

"You complained that I hadn't given you my new number, so I thought I'd better rectify my mistake. Now that you have it, I expect you to use it."

"Use it how?" she asks, her tone cautious. This is the exact tone she's always taken with me, and now I know what she sounds like when she reveals her emotions, this falls flat in comparison. There's so much distance between us, and I'm not sure how to eradicate it.

"You *are* aware of the uses of a phone number, are you not? And you're acquainted with the functions of your phone?"

I hear a soft huff and smirk. Got her. "You want me to *call* you?" she asks, unable to fully hide her indignation. Fuck. I wish I could see her right now. I have no doubt her eyes would be blazing with poorly concealed irritation, just like in her dressing room, and it'd be a sight to behold.

"I'm not that fussy," I tell her. "I'm fine with you texting me, too."

"You're… you're *not that fussy*," she repeats slowly, incredulous. I hum in agreement, enjoying messing with her. It's crazy, but something about her makes me act unlike myself. I'm desperate to see more of the woman she tries to hide from the world. The version of her that she buried, that's the one I want all to myself.

I know I shouldn't dare crave her the way I do, but fuck, I'm weak. With only a few months until our wedding, I want to occupy every single thought, so there's no space left for Eric. I'm done staying away from her. I made that mistake once — it won't ever happen again. This marriage is inevitable, after all.

"Okay," she says, resigned. "I'll text you, if that's what you want. Would you like me to send you updates on my daily activities?"

I frown, confused. What the fuck? I ask her to text me, and she instantly assumes that I want her to report shit to me? I suppose I had that coming — until recently, nearly all of our conversations were utilitarian. I'd made my displeasure with our engagement obvious, and now I'm paying for it.

For one single stupid moment, I think back to Lexington's presentation. I didn't think I'd actually have to steal her away from Eric, but what if he was right?

"That depends entirely on whether you intend to send me photographic updates of every shower you take," I murmur, suddenly all the more eager to mess with her. Angering her wasn't quite part of Lexington's plan, but I'm starting to realize the only way she'll let that mask slip is if I provoke

her. “I’m also open to you sending me videos of various outfit choices for next week’s charity gala, especially if you keep the camera rolling while you change.”

She gasps, and I can just about imagine the outrage in her eyes. I reckon angry sex with Faye would be the highlight of my fucking life. Someday, I’m going to have to provoke her into riding my cock, her nails digging into my skin.

I doubt she showed Eric any of the venom coursing through her blood. She’d have shown him all the best parts of herself, never realizing how much freedom there is in not having to put up a pretense. I suppose that’s why I’m suddenly finding it so hard to stay away from her — because on that day at The Lacara, I recognized something in her that I never expected to find. Something dark, broken, and utterly perfect for me.

“You’re crazy,” she snaps. “Make that kind of request again and I’ll call your grandmother pretending not to understand what you meant. I’ll act dumb as she scrambles to excuse your words.”

There’s my girl and her pretty claws. I burst out laughing, I can’t help it. How did it take me so long to realize that everything she’s shown me throughout the years was a facade? She only has herself to blame for making me addicted to tearing that illusion down.

I can almost hear that haze of anger drain away as realization dawns. My darling fiancée isn’t used to speaking her mind, and it shows. I listen as she draws a shaky breath.

“I-I… I’m sorry,” she rushes to say. “I didn’t—”

“Don’t,” I cut her off. “Don’t you dare apologize for being real with me, for calling me out on my bullshit. You’re about to become my wife, Faye. My equal. Hearing you act your part is a fucking delight. Keep fighting me, baby. I’m loving every second of it.”

A startled laugh fills my ears, and I smile to myself. “I think you might actually be insane,” she murmurs, her tone filled with wonder.

I let my eyes fall closed, enjoying this moment with her. I think *this* is what I’m developing an addiction to — real moments with her. No pretense, no expectations, nothing standing between us. I want more of this, of her. I just hope it isn’t too late to have that.

When I was younger, I was so certain that I could never want her, that I’d never overcome the guilt seeing her brings me. I burned every bridge

she tried to build between us throughout the years, only to find myself drowning in her.

“Dion,” she says, her voice soft, hesitant.

“Hmm?”

“I… would it be okay if I asked a question?”

“Of course.”

She draws a shaky breath, and I tighten my grip on my phone. She’s nervous, why? “That day at The Lacara, when you told me you were mine as much as I am yours… Those were pretty much your exact words, weren’t they? What did you mean by that?”

I frown, intrigued by her sudden question. “I thought it was obvious, Faye. I didn’t think I left much room for misunderstandings. I was referring to mutual fidelity, and you know it.” What the fuck is going on in that warped mind of hers? Is she trying to find a fucking loophole so she can still be with Eric?

“Okay,” she simply says, her voice shaky. I stare out the window, uncertain how far I can push her, how much I can demand. Each conversation with her feels like playing Tetris — one wrong move, and I’ll be building an unstable foundation entirely in the wrong direction, getting in over my head with no way to rectify my mistakes. One wrong move, and it’s game over.

“I’ll see you next week, at the annual Windsor charity gala,” I tell her. “We’ll talk more then. Try not to miss me too much in the meantime, my darling fiancée.”

I’m not sure what brought on her question, but whatever it is, I’m going to find out. In person, when I can look her in the eye and read those emotions she tries to hide so hard.

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Chapter Ten

Dion

"What took you so long?" Silas asks, annoyed. I frown, surprised to find both Xavier and Silas waiting for me inside the warehouse.

"*What*?" Xavier says. "You worked us both to the bone only to leave us out of the resolution? Absolutely not. This is about to be the highlight of my day."

Silas hums in agreement as he leads me into the open space, a thrill running down my spine when I notice Hannah tied against a chair in the corner. She looks like a filthy fucking mess, her long hair matted and her makeup smudged.

"I see you didn't bother gagging her," I murmur.

Xavier shrugs. "There's no one here to hear her scream. It seemed fun to let her wear herself out needlessly."

I shake my head in fake admonishment, when truthfully, I'd have done the same thing. Hannah looks up sharply when I grab an empty chair and slowly drag it toward her, the sound echoing off the walls eerily in the large empty warehouse.

I smirk as I read the emotions flashing through her eyes — fear first, then recognition, and finally confusion. Yeah, no one ever sees it coming. They all think Sierra is the craziest Windsor sibling, while Zane is the most dangerous. Everyone always fails to realize that I'm a perfect blend of both.

My sweet fiancée has no idea how right she was when she told me she suspects I'm insane.

"Hello, Hannah," I tell her, my tone polite as I place my chair right opposite hers. I sit down, and Xavier and Silas stand behind me. "I do apologize for the delay in getting to you." I glance at my watch, as though I'm mere minutes late for a meeting. "I kept you waiting for six days. How very rude of me."

She just stares at me, as though she's trying to get a read on the situation. I could tell, for a moment, she genuinely thought I'd come to save her. Silly girl.

I hold my hand out, and Silas hands me my favorite scalpel. Hannah flinches then, genuine fear flashing through her eyes. She whimpers, and I smile.

"Do you want to guess why you're here?" I ask, my tone pleasant as I place the scalpel at the tip of my finger and spin it around. I stare at it for a moment, keeping it perfectly balanced. A slight tremor would result in deep cuts, and for a single moment, I'm tempted to loosen my iron control just so I can find out if it'll hurt.

"Dion," Hannah says, her tone careful, as though she's speaking to an uncaged predator. "Please, I haven't hurt anyone, you know I haven't. I just… I just…"

I tear my gaze away from the metal spinning atop my finger and sigh. "You just… knowingly took what wasn't yours and continued to inflict emotional wounds on the one person that least deserved it. For years, you watched your own sister suffer while you manipulated my brother, taking advantage of his morals and his love for our family. Even once Raven married Ares because *you* refused to walk down that aisle, you continued to mess with them. Did you really think you wouldn't pay for it?"

Her eyes fill with tears, and I sigh. *How irritating*. I frown, suddenly realizing that I've never cared for tears, yet seeing tears in Faye's eyes nearly destroyed me. *Interesting*.

"Ares gave me the Windsor Kiss of Death," she tells me, her eyes flashing with anger. "I paid for what I did. He destroyed my acting career — and not just that. I can't work in the industry at all anymore. Within a matter of months, I've become a nobody. He took the one thing I cared about most. Isn't that enough?"

I grab the scalpel and hold it tightly in an effort to rein in my anger. “Considering we caught you at a luxury private resort, I’m going to say *no*. It’s not enough, Hannah. You can’t just mess with my family and expect to get away with it. I won’t stop until I see you looking the way Raven did each time she saw her designs burned in the streets, each time someone called her a home wrecker when all she ever did was the right thing. I want you to look like your heart is being torn out of your chest while it’s still beating, and you’re trying your hardest to breathe through it.”

I lean forward and rest the tip of the scalpel against her cheek. She freezes, and I grin as a bead of blood gathers at the tip of the blade. “You have no idea how tempted I am to carve up that pretty face of yours so Raven will never have to see you again,” I murmur. “Ares may have ended your career, but that isn’t good enough for me. Here’s the thing, Hannah. Ares has values and morals that I don’t share. He’s righteous and works within a framework that can be considered socially acceptable. I don’t. I’ll do what my siblings can’t or won’t, and I’ll do it without an ounce of shame or regret.”

“Y-you won’t get away with this,” she says, trembling. Her eyes flit through the room, as though she’s looking for an escape that she knows she won’t find.

“No one is coming for you,” I murmur. “That producer that was funding your lavish lifestyle? The one you’d been seeing for years behind Ares’s back?” Her eyes widen in disbelief, and I chuckle. “Yeah, he sends his regards.”

“W-what?” she stammers.

I tilt my head and look her over. “You still don’t fully realize what you’ve gotten yourself into, do you? You don’t realize that it wasn’t just Ares and Raven you wronged. It was all of us. You fuck with one of us, you’ll feel all our wrath. Ares you survived, but the combination of the rest of us will make you wish you hadn’t.”

I run a hand through my hair and sigh. “Did you know your little producer really wanted to be a father? Imagine his surprise when I showed him your medical records.” I tut mockingly as her eyes widen. “Aborting a baby he wanted so desperately… Even I would’ve let you live out the rest of your life in peace merely for the sake of your unborn child. I guess that’s why Ares went so easy on you, because the child you carried would’ve still been Raven’s niece or nephew.”

I sigh as I spin the scalpel around again, my mind whirling. “I couldn’t risk your little lover changing his mind about you, though. I had to immobilize him. He had no real power, no connections to protect him, just piles of money that he threw around to craft the illusion of influence. All it took was one call to my sister-in-law, Valentina. You remember her, don’t you?”

She looks away in defeat, and I smirk. Breaking her spirit is half the fun. “COO of Windsor Finance and The Windsor Bank? She didn’t even ask any questions — she just got it done. Three days, and he’d tragically become bankrupt because he’d invested in all the wrong companies *against* her advice. Turns out he’d allegedly heard rumors from his friends about an exciting new investment. Funny, that. I wonder where all of those rumors came from.”

I glance at Silas and Xavier. “What shall we do with her?” I murmur, offering Silas my scalpel. “You wanna have a go while I mull it over? I know you were pissed about what she did to Raven.”

He seems to think it over before shaking his head. “No, I can’t get my clothes dirty. My wife picked this outfit for me this morning, and if I come home with blood on me, I’ll have to explain why. I love her, but I don’t trust that she won’t go to Raven straight away to gloat about what we’ve done, and I know you don’t want Rave to know.”

Xavier groans. “So just change?” he mutters.

Silas chuckles. “If I come home wearing a different outfit, you might as well put that scalpel to my throat yourself. My little psycho will definitely demand an explanation if I do something as stupid as that.”

I raise a brow and glance at Xavier. “Do you have a vial of that stuff I like?” I murmur.

He nods and reaches for his inside pocket, taking a small bottle out. He hands it to me, and I stare at it for a moment. “Here’s what we’re going to do,” I tell Hannah. “You can either drink the poison in this bottle and end things now.” She begins to cry, and I grit my teeth. I really do fucking hate it when they cry. “But I’m not entirely heartless, so I’ll give you an easy reprieve on account of your ties to my sister-in-law. I’m highly concerned that she’d blame herself for anything that I might do to you, so I’m reluctant to do permanent damage. I don’t give a fuck about you, but I absolutely cannot risk hurting Raven any further.”

I glance back at Xavier, and his expression falls. “No,” he says. “Whatever you—”

I grin and cut him off. “The Kingstons are looking for a new maid,” I lie. “Work for them for five years, serving every one of those people you thought you were better than.” She doesn’t need to ask me why *five years* — she knows how many years of happiness she stole away from Raven.

“We’ll put you in a pretty maid costume, and you can serve drinks and dinner at every big event that everyone you know will be present at. I’ll have you clear their plates and take their coats, and we’ll even pay you a little salary. No more luxury escapes, no more pretending you simply retired. I’m going to ensure you get the attention you always wanted.”

Hannah looks horrified, and I catch her steal a glance at the poison in my hands. Seriously? She’d rather end her life than work a service job for a few years? I guess the humiliation is too much for her, but then again, that’s why I chose this as punishment. I doubt she even realizes that I’m letting her get off incredibly easy. I’m giving her a chance. If she keeps her head down and suffers through the excessive humiliation I’m about to make her endure, I’ll let her go in five years. If not… then I suppose an incredibly unfortunate tragic accident awaits her, perhaps one that severely injures her but doesn’t quite kill her. I’ll just make her wish she was dead while taking away any means of ending her life.

“I… I’ll do it,” she says, her tone defeated. “I’ll work for the Kingstons.”

There’s a slight glimmer of hope in her eyes, as though she thinks she can escape her fate. That hope will only make her fall more painful. “It’s so cute,” I whisper, “that you think you had a choice.”

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Chapter Eleven

Dion

"What's bothering you, honey?" Mom asks, her thumb pressing between my brows to keep me from frowning.

My heart instantly overflows with longing at the sight of her, and I inhale sharply. I reach for her, scared she'll disappear the moment my fingers touch her face, but she doesn't. She really is here with me.

I exhale slowly when she leans into my touch, her cheek pressed against the palm of my hand. "Mom," I murmur, my voice breaking. "I miss you so much, every single day. We all do." My words tumble out in a rush, for fear I won't get another chance to say them.

"You're all grown up," she says, her voice filled with sorrow. "Ares and Luca are married now, and soon you will be too. I wish I could've been there to watch your brothers say I do."

"Me too," I whisper. "You'd love Raven and Val. They've become family, and I just know you'd love them like they're your own daughters."

She places her hand over mine, keeping my palm pressed against her cheek. "You know it's your fault, right? It's your fault I didn't get to see any of you grow up. It's your fault that the only time you get to see me is in your dreams."

My heart wrenches painfully, and my words lodge in my throat. "Forgive me," I whisper. "I'm so sorry, Mom. I regret it more than you'll ever know."

She shakes her head, her expression filled with hatred. "You're a monster," she murmurs. "You know that, don't you? It's why you held back with Hannah. You're scared Raven will find out, and she'll stop looking at you like you're the brother she never had. You didn't show Hannah mercy because you felt sorry for her — you have no remorse. You did it in a misguided attempt to prove to yourself that you're not vicious. It's laughable, really."

"Mom," I whisper, my voice breaking. I so badly want to refute her words, but I can't, because she's right. "I… I'm sorry. I didn't mean to—"

"What will Faye think when she discovers who you truly are?" she ponders, cutting me off, a cruel smile on her face. "You tried to stay away from her for years because you were scared that if you let her in, she'd hate what she'd find as much as I do. Your time is up, Dion."

Mom gently pats my cheek, her sweet touch jarring. "If you'd been a better person, perhaps she might one day have forgiven you for what you did to her mother, Dad, and me. But you're not repentant, are you? You're worse now than you were then. Soon, she'll realize that, and then she won't even give you those fake smiles of hers. I hope you drown in an ocean of her tears."

I gasp as I'm startled awake by the force of my pain. I groan and bury my face in my hands, my breathing ragged. My chest feels hollow, and the wounds suddenly feel fresh.

Years of therapy, and one single dream still makes me second-guess everything. I stare up at the ceiling, my thoughts racing.

I've gone over the records countless times, and I've spoken to every person involved in the investigation. There was nothing wrong with my parents' plane, and there's no explanation for their crash. Logically, I know I wasn't entirely to blame. Or at least, that's what my therapist would like me to believe.

According to her, I was simply a child eager for my parents to come home, and that's all it was. She's been trying to convince me that asking them to return early didn't crash their plane, but some days, it's harder to believe that than most. Especially with Faye re-entering my life, the guilt

increasingly evolves into a vicious monster, hitting me when I least expect it. Her mother was on that plane, after all, right alongside mine. The truth is, if I hadn't made that request, they wouldn't have been on the flight at all.

I sit up with a sigh, giving up on sleep entirely. I don't have these kinds of dreams as often anymore, but every time I do, I'm brought back to the past. For years, I obsessively studied the case files, and I've only just about learned to let it go. Tonight feels like a step back when I can least afford it. Between the relocation of the company and Faye, there's no time to obsess over things I can't fix. I can't afford to lose myself in the past and the guilt that accompanies it, not again.

I can pretty much guess what brought this on. Each time I see Faye, I'm hit with another dream. This one was long overdue. It's almost as though I'm not allowed to forget that I don't deserve her, that I played a role in her loss — however small it may have been.

I haven't been able to stop thinking about the way she felt against me when I kneeled in front of her in my hotel room, her thighs wrapped around my waist. I keep imagining what she'll look like as I push deep inside her in that exact same position, how she'll sound with my name on her lips.

For years, she unknowingly kept chipping away at my defenses each time I saw her, until she finally obliterated them entirely that day in my suite a few weeks ago. There's no point in denying it any longer — I want Faye, and not just physically. Seeing two of my brothers happily married made me want things I know I don't deserve. Not with Faye, at least.

I run a hand through my hair and pull on it for a moment, trying to shake myself out of my destructive thoughts. Wanting her feels so fucking shameful. Who the fuck do I think I am, desiring her? I know I'm not worthy of her, and I still forced her to end things with Eric. Between the two of us, she's the one who deserves happiness. I know that, and I still stole her smile away. How much more will I take from her in the next few years?

I take a deep breath, wishing I could stop my thoughts from spiraling. I don't have these episodes as often anymore, but fuck, this is hard. I knew being around Faye would be triggering for me, but I never thought it would wreck me the way it has.

I grab my laptop, unable to resist. Just one more time. If I read through the files one more time, I might find something I missed. There has to be a rational reason behind a thoroughly tested and highly advanced private jet

crashing on a route it had flown countless times. I can't shake the feeling there's an obvious detail that's staring me in the face — a tiny thread that'll unravel the whole case. I know that's just my paranoia talking, but I can't dismiss the sentiment.

I sigh and fall back onto my pillow when the details remain unchanged, the clues hidden and elusive. I'm not even sure why I keep looking for an answer. Is it because I don't think I can forgive myself without it? Perhaps a small part of me truly is looking for proof that I wasn't to blame.

My hands tremble as I grab my phone. I'd meant to pull up a photo of my parents, but instead, I find myself staring at the article I left open in my browser. It was an interview Faye did with a music magazine, and they added a photo of her seated behind her grand piano. I only hesitate for a split-second before saving it to my phone, a hint of guilt rushing down my spine.

What would she say if she found out that I've followed the rise of her career, and by some extent, *her*, for years? I've read every article she's featured in and watched every interview.

I scroll through my gallery until I find a video I took of Faye at her concert. My fingers hover over my screen for a moment before pressing play, and the haunting melody of *Gaspard de la nuit* fills my bedroom. Did she know this used to be one of my personal favorites?

Sitting through that performance was torture, yet here I am, once again unable to take my eyes off Faye. She doesn't know it yet, but she'll be my downfall. I just hope I don't take her down with me.

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Chapter Twelve

FAYE

"This dress is unreal," Chloe says, her eyes glued to the shimmery blue fabric. "I can't believe you get to wear a genuine *Raven Windsor* couture gown. That's *crazy*."

I smile at my sister, glad to see the light returned to her eyes. To say that my father was furious about the photos of Maria and Dion would be a gross understatement. I'd been prepared for the pain that normally would've followed, and though it came, it wasn't in the shape I expected. All week, he's dragged either Abigail or Chloe in front of me every single day, making me watch as he punished them for my inability to keep Dion in check. He's never touched Chloe before, and knowing that I'm the reason he's started to has left me feeling empty and broken inside.

The helplessness that's swarmed me has been sickening. I'd rather he break every single bone in my body instead of this. He's the one that kept me away from the Windsors for so long, only to get mad now that I'm not close enough to them. For years, he was scared I'd do or say something that would result in the engagement being called off, yet now I'm somehow supposed to know Dion well enough to keep him invested in me. I can do no right in his eyes, and it's exhausting. I'm tired of trying and failing to keep my family safe.

I take a deep breath and stare in the mirror, barely recognizing myself. The color of my dress is a near-perfect match for my eyes, and even I have

to admit that it's a true piece of art. The fabric highlights my curves beautifully, and with each move, my left leg is exposed right up to my thigh. I've never worn something quite this revealing, and I'm somewhat surprised the Windsors would send me this at all. It seems borderline scandalous.

Would things get easier if I do as my father asked and at least attempt to keep Dion's attention on me? In this dress, that might just be possible. I bite my lip as my head fills with memories of his hands on my body and the way he told me to be good for him. I hate to admit it, but I don't entirely resent the thought of being with him. Not as much as I used to — and I should.

"Do you think they'll photograph you in this the way they always do with the Windsors? Maybe they'll put you in the gossip magazines!" Chloe asks, her excitement palpable. I was scared she'd hate me after the way Father hit her, but things between us seem unchanged, thankfully.

"I doubt it," I answer carefully. "The only photographers allowed at the Windsors' annual charity gala all get their cameras checked before leaving the venue. Even if they take photos of me, they won't be allowed to keep them. Windsor Media won't let that happen."

The Windsors have always kept my engagement to Dion quiet, much to my relief and my father's annoyance. I doubt that'll change. From what I understand, they'll wait to make a formal announcement until we're married, to keep the press away from our wedding.

Chloe nods in understanding and runs her hands over the straps of my dress. "This is so pretty. I really want to wear it to prom," she murmurs. "That'd be wicked. We'll have to get it tailored, though. Or maybe once you're married you can just get me a new one."

I take a steadying breath, a hint of unease running down my spine. She's young, so I understand how easy it is for her to be blinded by the luxury that comes with being a Windsor. Still, her comments don't sit well with me.

I'm always careful not to show the girls my trepidation, my fears, but she knows this isn't a real marriage. I won't be able to give her whatever she wants, and I'd hope she wouldn't ask that of me. I'd hate to let her down even further. It's bad enough that I can't protect her the way I thought I could.

Chloe leans in and smoothes out the fabric of my dress while I touch up my lipstick. “It’s so unfair that you keep getting these nice things while we’re left with your hand-me-downs,” she says, her expression souring. I tense, helplessness washing over me. “You’re literally about to dance the night away at an event that most celebrities can’t even get an invite to, and I have to sit at home. As if that’s not bad enough, now I also have to suffer because of your mistakes, and I don’t even get anything in return. At least you got all kinds of things from the Windsors out of it, but what about me?”

Guilt and shock render me speechless, and I lower my gaze. “I’m sorry, Chloe. I never meant for any of this to happen. I thought… Father has never hurt you before, so I thought you’d be safe if I just kept trying my best. I’ll do better, I promise. I’ll do everything I can to make sure he has no reason to be angry with any of us.” I wish I could promise her that I won’t let him hurt her again, but that isn’t a promise I can keep. Father’s anger has become volatile and unpredictable lately.

She nods, looking unconvinced and bitter. “If you’re really sorry, then let me come to the charity gala. I really want to go, Faye. Why is it that only you ever get to attend these things?”

My heart sinks, and I gently shake my head. “You know I’d bring you if I could,” I murmur. “I don’t… I don’t hold any sway with the Windsors. The guest list is carefully curated, and if I ask them to make an exception for me, it could upset them or make them feel like I’m taking advantage of their kindness. What do you think would happen if Father heard about me making such a request?”

I’ve always been told to keep my head down and speak as little as possible. I wouldn’t dare ask anything of Dion. Besides, had it been up to me, I wouldn’t even have gone myself. I always feel out of place at these events, and every single time, it’s clear that Dion doesn’t want me there. It might look glamorous from the outside, but I’m always concerned I’ll do or say the wrong thing. Attending these events feels like being on stage to play chords I’ve never even seen before, while an entire room anticipates my failure.

I tense at the sound of a sharp knock, and we both fall silent, the two of us instantly straightening our backs in the few moments before Father walks into my room.

The relentless anger in his gaze makes my stomach twist, and I draw a shallow breath as he pauses right in front of me. He’s convinced Dion is

trying to get out of our arranged marriage, and if he succeeds, I'm not sure what he would do to us.

Father's gaze roams over my body, calculating, analyzing. "Faye," he says, his voice soft. "From what I understand, Dion only just came back this morning. He stayed in London until the very last second." His tone is accusing, as though I have any influence over Dion's choices. "He didn't come back alone," he adds, his expression turning ugly. "His secretary, Maria, is moving back with him."

My heart clenches painfully, and I lower my gaze as the photos The Herald posted flicker through my mind. Father moves past me and grits his teeth. The malice in his eyes makes Chloe whimper, and that only further agitates him.

He reaches for her and firmly wraps his hand around her hair before yanking on it so hard that she falls to his feet. She begins to cry, and I force myself to keep my breathing steady, to stay calm.

"You'll need to keep an eye on Maria. He's with her every second of every day, and he has been for years," he says as he places his shoe on the side of Chloe's face, pressing her into the wooden floor harshly.

I try my best to keep my heart intact as my sister's sobs fill my bedroom. It pains me that I can't defend her against him. The first time he hit her, I tried to jump in front of her, and he warned me that he'd only double her punishment if I ever tried it again. With Dion being back, he doesn't want to risk leaving any bruises on me, but this is far worse. Chloe doesn't deserve to be punished for my inadequacies, yet there's nothing I can do to stop it from happening.

"You need to steal Dion's attention away from Maria and keep him happy. In that pretty dress, even you should be able to keep him enticed for a night," he grits out. "Every single year, he takes you home within an hour of you arriving at the gala. Tonight, you need to make sure he keeps you around until the end of the night. If you dare come home before then, you can sleep outside, you hear me? I'll give both Chloe and Abigail a new bruise for every minute you're home early."

His expression hardens then, and he kicks Chloe's shoulder as she curls herself into a ball. "Do you need another reminder of what's at stake?" he asks, his voice soft.

Fear runs down my spine, and I shake my head. "No, Father," I reply instantly. If this engagement were to end, years of sacrifice would go to

waste. We need the money we'll get once I'm married. My father's debts mean we'd lose our home if this marriage doesn't happen, but that'd likely be the least of our worries. Chloe is still a minor, and Abigail won't leave. If my father loses his last hope, he'd take it out on all of us, and I'm not sure I could save them.

"If you can't get to Dion, you will need to start charming everyone around him. By the time you walk down that aisle, you'll need to be entrenched in his life so thoroughly that there's no way out for him without letting down his family."

The thought of manipulating Dion and the Windsors in that way sickens me, yet I nod demurely. Is this what the rest of my life looks like? Endless manipulation and facades?

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Chapter Thirteen

Dion

I lean back against my car and stare up at Faye's house, taking a moment to gather my thoughts. She and I have attended this gala together for the last three years, but I've never once picked her up myself. I've always sent a driver and done all I could to keep some distance between us, convinced I was doing both of us a favor.

Some pleasantries when I see her in the crowd, one single mandatory dance, and then I ask her if she'd like to go home before escorting her out. That's the script we've both adhered to for the last three years, but tonight will be different. From now on, everything will be different.

While I was away, I kept wondering what would have happened if I'd paid her more attention. Would she still have ended up with Eric? Or would these few months leading up to our wedding have been different — filled with anticipation instead of trepidation? I can't change the past, but I can do better going forward. It'll never be enough, but she still deserves my best.

I pause by the front door, feeing oddly conflicted. Sixteen years of being engaged to her, and I've never been here before. I have no idea what lies beyond this door, and I've never wanted to know. I've never let myself wonder, never let myself ask more of her than I should — not before I have to.

The door opens moments after I ring the bell, and Faye appears. "Fuck," I mutter, my eyes roaming over her. She looks… devastatingly beautiful.

She’s a vision in blue, and the way that dress clings to her body is positively sinful. How am I supposed to maintain my sanity for an entire night when she looks like *that*?

“Dion,” she says, her eyes widening in shock for a fraction of a second, before the despondency I’ve become used to replaces it. It’s odd, but somehow, I want more. More of a reaction, more light in her eyes, more words out of those pretty lips. More of her. Now that I know about the fire she keeps hidden deep within, nothing less will do. Before the night is over, I’ll make those beautiful blue irises spit fire.

“Ready?” I ask, offering her my arm. She nods, her gaze downcast as her arm slips through mine. Even with the heels that are clicking against the ground, she’s still so incredibly tiny, and having her on my arm elicits a feeling I’ve never felt before. It’s protectiveness laced with tenderness.

I hold the door open for her, and she nods at me in appreciation, her attitude as distant as it’s always been. It never bothered me before. Hell, I’m not sure I ever noticed it. I’ve always been so busy running away from her, I failed to notice that she’s never once taken a single step toward me.

She’s quiet as I get in the car, her posture subdued. I thought she might ask me why I picked her up myself, or at the very least, I expected her to ask how my trip was. She doesn’t. How come I never realized that she never initiates a conversation between us?

I twist toward her, taking her in. “Faye,” I murmur. She looks up, a hint of caution in her demeanor. “Did you miss me?”

Her eyes widen, and for a moment, I see panic in them as she tries to decide how to respond. Her expression is carefully blank, but those eyes. Oh those fucking eyes.

“I’ll take that as a no,” I tell her, chuckling.

She exhales, seemingly in relief. It was such a simple question, yet she seemed genuinely worried about getting the answer wrong. Do I truly scare her that much? I’d meant to joke around with her a little, but maybe I shouldn’t have.

“Fine,” I murmur. “Tell me that you’ve been good for me, then.” This time, I’m not joking. I need to know she hasn’t spoken to him. I shouldn’t care as much as I do, but fuck, I can’t bear the thought of her going behind my back, of him on the phone with her all night.

“Yes,” she tells me, her mask cracking. “I’ve been a good girl for you, Dion.”

Fuck. I know what she meant, but her words bring an entirely different image to mind. I clear my throat and try my best to drag my eyes off her, but instead I find myself staring at her lips. My good girl. My future wife. I can't wait to have her. She's so fucking small… can she even take me?

"Dion?"

I snap out of it and straighten in my seat, praying she can't tell how hard my cock is in this goddamn tight tux I'm wearing. I've never even kissed her, and she's already got me fucked up over her. What changed? For years, I never thought of her that way, yet now I can't stop wanting her.

"We'll enter the venue through a different entrance to avoid the paparazzi," I tell her as I start the car. "They're rather eager for shots of my siblings and me tonight."

My eyes drift toward hers, only to find her looking at me with an expression I can't read. I've never been curious about what goes on behind those beautiful eyes of hers, but I am now. She merely nods at me and looks away, both of us falling silent.

Normally I would've been grateful for it, but tonight the silence speaks volumes. There's nothing for us to say, nor do we know each other well enough to have a meaningful conversation. She's just a stranger that'll soon take my name, and I only have myself to blame for it.

The gala is in full swing by the time we walk in, yet I notice several men stopping mid-conversation, their eyes roaming over my fiancée. I grit my teeth and grab her hand, entwining our fingers. She stares up at me in surprise, and I suddenly realize I've never held her hand before. It feels so fucking tiny in mine, and nothing has ever felt more right.

"Did you forget?" I murmur, taking a step closer to her, until my body brushes against hers.

"Forget?" she repeats, a cute frown on her face. "What did I forget?"

"That I'm yours." I lift our joined hands to my lips and kiss the back of her hand. "If you don't hold my hand, I might get lost in the crowd. Then what?"

Her lips tug up at the edges, as though she's trying her best to suppress a smile. "Dion, you're a giant. You're at least six-foot-three. I'm relatively certain you can look over everyone's head. I think you'll be fine."

I pull her onto the dance floor and shake my head. "No, I don't think I'll be fine without you."

Faye's eyes widen, and she stares up at me with something that looks an awful lot like interest. I never realized my own fiancée has never looked at me the way other women do. This is a first.

"Dance with me," I murmur, before pulling her against me. Her arms instantly wrap around my neck, as they always do, but this time, that's not enough for me. I pull her closer, my palms roaming over her lower back possessively, and she gasps, her eyes finding mine.

What I see in them takes my fucking breath away. There's something akin to desire dancing in her beautiful blue irises, and for the life of me, I can't look away. I pull her closer still, until her body is flush against mine, and she tilts her head, sending me a questioning look. "You look utterly captivating tonight, Faye," I say without thinking.

Her eyes widen a fraction, and then she smiles. *Fuck me*. I pause in the middle of our dance, losing my train of thought, my mind overwhelmed with the vision she's presenting me with. "Dion?" she asks, her voice soft.

"I think that might be the first time I've ever seen you smile, you know? A real smile, not the ones you usually wear in my presence."

Her cheeks rapidly turn rosy, and all it does is make her more enticing. I stare at her, savoring this new version of her. So this is what she looks like the moment her perfect mask cracks. *Enchanting*. "What can I say to make you do that again?"

She laughs then, and I'm not sure what surprises me most, the way she becomes even more beautiful than she was before, or the way the sound warms my icy heart. "You want to… make me *smile*?"

We resume our dance, and I find myself smiling back at her. This evening just took an entirely unexpected turn. "Well, that's what I meant, yes, but you've just given me a better challenge. I think I might need to hear you laugh for me again. In fact, I dare say that my enjoyment of this evening greatly depends on it."

She laughs again, and her head falls back a little. Fucking gorgeous, and so unlike the woman I thought she was. There's nothing doll-like about her in this moment. No, she's very real, and she's mine.

The song ends, but instead of leading her off the dance floor, I keep her pressed against me, not ready to let her go just yet. I'm not supposed to enjoy her, I don't deserve to, but fuck, I don't think I can walk away. Not right now. Not when she's looking at me like she doesn't despise every fiber of my being.

“Another dance?” she asks, her tone conveying her intrigue. “You don’t have an escape plan ready tonight?”

My lips twitch, and I just about manage to hide my surprise. I didn’t think she’d call me out on my past behavior, and I’m pleasantly surprised that she did. “No,” I admit. “I’m all out of excuses, and we’re both out of time. Before the year is over, you’ll be my wife. There’s no avoiding this, not anymore.”

Her smile melts away then, and she averts her gaze. “I know,” she murmurs, and her less-than-eager tone brings an ache to my chest. Perhaps she truly has enchanted me tonight, because I find myself wanting things I swore I’d never even dream of. Things I’ll never deserve.

My hand roams over her lower back, and she melts against me as a slow ballad begins to play. “That question you asked over the phone,” I murmur, my hand slowly making its way up, until the tips of my fingers are pressing into her nape. “What prompted it?”

Some of her relaxedness fades away, and so does that smile of hers. She averts her gaze, and I pull her closer still, until her body is flush against mine, the two of us coming to a standstill on the dance floor. “Answer me.” My tone is rough despite its pleading tilt, a hint of desperation making its way into it.

“Make me a promise?” she murmurs, her beautiful blue eyes filling with equal parts hope and fear, as though she wants to put her faith in me but doesn’t dare to. She’s giving me a chance, but for what, I’m not sure.

“Anything,” I whisper, taking a leap of faith.

Her body relaxes against mine, and she draws a shaky breath. “Promise me you won’t be angry when I give you my answer, and that you won’t punish me for intruding on your privacy. I know that our marriage isn’t real, and I wouldn’t…”

“Tell me,” I demand. “I won’t be mad at you, baby. Just tell me what prompted that question.”

She looks hesitant, but her arms tighten around my neck in a needy way that I absolutely adore. “I asked because of those photos of Maria and you at the beach. The ones that The Herald posted. You told me you were going back to London for work, and then you were photographed half-naked with your secretary on a beach in Spain, and I just wasn’t sure what to think.” Pure helplessness and resignation flashes through her eyes, and she averts her face, hiding herself even though she’s in my arms. “I’m sorry,” she

murmurs. “I shouldn’t… I shouldn’t have asked. It’s clear that… that you didn’t want me to know. I can turn a blind eye, Dion. Of course I can. I’d always expected that I’d have to.”

“Please look at me,” I murmur.

Her entire body is tense as she faces me, and my stomach fucking drops at the sight of her despair. She looks so hopeless, so hurt, and it’s all my fault. Is this the look she wore throughout her teens, each time I was photographed with someone else?

I inhale shakily as I look into her eyes. “Faye, I know this may be hard to believe, but I was there to facilitate a joint acquisition between Sierra and Zane. Sierra is buying the grounds the hotel I was visiting is built on, while Zane is acquiring the hotel itself. I may have been in my swim wear, but it was only because the CEO demanded that we complete our negotiations while spending a day at the beach, having lunch and using all the facilities. I haven’t seen the photos, but I can assure you it isn’t what it looked like. From the moment I told you I was yours, I truly have been. I always will be.”

She looks at me as though she wants to believe me but can’t, and it kills me to know that I’ve caused her pain. It feels like I can never do right by her, no matter how hard I try. It’s like we’re simply ill-fated, and each step I take towards her only ends up harming her. Sierra once told me that making Faye happy could be the absolution I seek, but how?

I know how to provoke her into revealing the parts of herself she keeps hidden, and though the steps have been incremental, we’re closer now than we ever have been before, but it isn’t enough. Keeping her away from Eric isn’t the same as truly making her mine. How do I make the woman in my arms happy when I’m not even sure what real happiness feels like?

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Chapter Fourteen

Faye

I watch my phone ring atop my piano, guilt warring with temptation as I reject Eric's call, my thoughts turning to Dion instead. There was something about the way he flirted with me at the gala that suddenly made our engagement feel real, when it never has before.

Standing on that dance floor with him, his hands on my lower back and my body pressed against his… it made me feel something I've never felt before — not even with Eric. I felt safe, and for a few moments, he made me feel wanted. Dancing with him just felt so *right*.

I've never felt so conflicted before. My heart still aches at the thought of Eric, but when I think of Dion, I'm no longer filled with apprehension and fear. When I think of him asking me whether I've been good for him, my stomach flutters, and my heart beats a little faster.

When he told me that he's mine now and he'd start taking our engagement seriously, I thought he was joking. I didn't think anything between us would change at all, and on the surface, nothing has. So why does everything feel different?

"Faye," my father calls, and I look up to find him standing in the doorway of our soundproof music room. "Anne Windsor is picking you up in ten minutes. Be ready."

He sounds frantic, worried, and I jump up instantly. Dion's grandmother has always put me on edge. She reminds me of a softer, non-violent version

of my father. Still a tyrant, but just of a different kind. I haven't spoken more than a handful of words to her in the last couple of years, and I was hoping to keep it that way until the wedding. I'm terrified I'll do or say something wrong today, or that she found out what I did and simply wants to confront me in person.

My gaze drops to my outfit, and I take in the white silk blouse with the cream-colored pencil skirt and my matching heels. This should be fine, right? Most of my wardrobe is *Windsor Material*, as my father likes to call it. Ever since I was twelve, I've had a stylist who chooses my clothing. Every few months, a whole new collection of clothes appears with instruction on how to wear them. This season, everything is business casual. I have a feeling my father gets the Windsors to pay for it somehow, but I've never dared ask him about it. I suspect a question like that would set him off.

"I wonder why she wants to see me," I muse out loud.

My father's head snaps up, his shoulder tensing as his anger builds. My heart sinks, and I lower my eyes, wishing I'd kept my mouth closed. "You should be grateful she wants to see you at all," he tells me, his tone threatening. "You'd better act grateful and civilized. If I hear one bad thing about your meeting today, I'll ensure Chloe won't be able to walk out of this house for at least a week."

A chill runs down my spine, and my stomach turns. My first instinct is to tell him she shouldn't be punished for my impudence, but I know better than that. "Yes, Father," I say instead.

My feet are unsteady as I walk back to my bedroom to double-check my makeup and outfit. I learned long ago what the consequences are if I try to look normal for once. My father never lets me forget the role I'm supposed to play. *A future Windsor*. A soft depreciating huff escapes my lips, disgust settling in my stomach. I'm tired of pretending, of being scared, yet that's all that lies ahead of me. Today, my fear will simply shift from my father to Dion's grandmother.

I'm near-numb as I make my way down, unsure what she might want from me. She invites me over at least once a month, but my father has always had an excuse ready. What makes today different?

My eyes widen a fraction when I see her black limousine parked in front of my house, a shiver running down my spine. I hadn't meant to make her

wait. The last thing I want to do is get on her nerves before I even have a chance to greet her.

“Good afternoon, Grandma Anne,” I murmur politely as I slip into the backseat next to her.

She smiles at me, her green eyes so startlingly similar to Dion’s that I find myself staring a moment too long. “I’m so glad you could make it,” she tells me as she wraps her arm around me, in a side hug. I tense, surprised by the gesture, and she throws me another reassuring smile. “Something always seems to come up when I ask you to come over. I was starting to think you were avoiding me.”

My heart stutters as I try to decipher her words. Does she know my father was purposely keeping me from her? Is she blaming me for it? “It’s good to see you,” I murmur simply, choosing my words carefully.

The privacy window between the driver and us lowers, and I tense as Maria comes into view. “Hi, Faye,” she says, throwing me a sweet smile. “I hope you don’t mind me tagging along.”

I stare at her numbly for a moment, my father’s words coming to mind. *There’s no way Maria is merely his secretary. He’s with her every second of every day, and he has been for years*.

Dion denied it, but could there be a thread of truth in my father’s words? The thought makes me oddly uncomfortable, in a way I’ve never experienced before. She certainly is beautiful, with her perfectly straight shoulder-length blonde hair and her flawless makeup.

Maria’s smile wavers, and I finally snap out of it. “Hi, Maria,” I say, my voice even and my lips tipped up into a polite smile. If there’s one thing I excel at, it’s acting like everything is fine while anxiety eats me up inside.

She looks like there’s more she wants to say, but she ends up nodding at me politely before straightening in her seat. I follow suit and glance back at Grandma Anne, only to find her studying me with an intent gaze. She grins at me, her expression softening, but something about it seems calculated. I can’t quite put my finger on it, but something about her reminds me of my father.

“We’re going to Dion’s home on the Windsor estate,” she tells me. “Dion is having it renovated, and I thought you might want to decorate it yourself. Maria is here to help with anything you might want to order. Dion hasn’t hired a local personal assistant yet, so she’s filling in for now,”

Grandma Anne explains. “Usually, she doesn’t handle any of Dion’s personal errands, but she will for now.”

I nod thoughtfully. I’ve tried so hard not to think about anything beyond the wedding that I didn’t stop to wonder what it’d be like to live with Dion. I’ve certainly never considered what our house would look like, and I wonder if Grandma Anne realizes just how much it means to me that she’s asking for my input.

I stare out the window as large gates appear in the distance. The Windsor estate never ceases to impress me, but at the same time, it’s always made me feel endlessly inadequate. Could I ever truly belong here?

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Chapter Fifteen

FAYE

I stand behind Grandma Anne as Maria presses her thumb against the scanner at Dion's front door. It swings open moments later, and something akin to envy washes over me. Dion must trust her implicitly if she has such easy access to his home when I've never even been here before.

"Dion and I designed this part of the house so that there's plenty of open space," she tells me, gesturing at what I assume will become the living room. "All of this glass brings so much natural light into the house, especially in the morning."

Something about her tone makes me uncomfortable, and I can't figure out why. She's being perfectly polite, but with each word she speaks, my despondency increases. Dion told me that he truly had been working in Spain, but he never denied the rumors about them fully. Were they dating until recently?

I bite my lip and take in the expansive glass wall overlooking an outdoor pool, trying my best to shake off the thought. Maria catches me looking and smiles knowingly. "The pool is probably my favorite part of the house," she says. "It's the only thing we didn't change."

There's something about that wistful smile of hers that grates on me. It's almost as though she's reminded of memories she made with Dion in there, and I can't help but wonder what exactly she might be thinking of. No

doubt, it involves a half-naked Dion. He's extraordinarily handsome in a suit, so I can only imagine how irresistible he must look without it.

An unfamiliar emotion rushes through me, and my eyes widen a fraction when I identify it as *possessiveness*. I've never felt that before, not even with Eric.

Maria sighs, and my possessiveness quickly transforms into guilt. Maybe Eric and I aren't the only ones left heartbroken by this marriage. If not for me, would Dion be marrying Maria? They complement each other perfectly. She's closer to him in age and they've always worked well together. Even physically, she's a better fit for him with her height. My heart aches when I imagine the two of them together, and the feeling catches me by surprise.

"I was thinking of adding a large round sofa," Maria tells me. "Probably gray. I think I'll go with a dark marble dining table as well."

I tense as she continues to tell me how she plans to decorate the house. The way she's speaking makes it sound like she plans to be here often, and I stand back in shock, unease running down my spine. It's something I hadn't seriously considered before, but her presence here might be something I'll have to get used to. Dion doesn't seem to be a violent person, but that doesn't mean he won't hurt me in other ways.

"*Maria*," Grandma Anne says, her tone sharp. "You're here to take orders from Faye. Your decorating recommendations are not welcome." Her harshness surprises me, especially because she's always been quite gentle with me.

She turns to me then and smiles in that way I've become accustomed to — as though she's trying to hide her viciousness behind a friendly exterior but can't quite manage it. "Tell me, Faye," she says, her voice soft and encouraging. "How would you like to decorate your home? Just speak your mind, sweetheart. Anything you want."

I stare at her wide-eyed, caught off-guard. No one has ever asked me for my opinion so directly, and it startles me. I don't dare glance back at Maria. I feel caught between the two women, and I hate feeling that way. At home, at least I always know who I can't afford to offend, but here, now, I'm lost.

"I think Maria's ideas sound great," I lie, my voice trembling just a little despite the confidence I tried to instill in it. The way she wants to decorate is all wrong for this space. It'll take away a lot of that beautiful light that I

love, but I don't dare speak my mind. If I upset her, Dion might take her grievances out on me later. I'd better not risk it.

"I disagree."

I freeze when I hear Dion's voice and turn around to find him leaning against the wall behind me. How long has he been standing there? I never heard him come in at all.

His gaze roams over my face, as though he's searching for something, and it unsettles me. I'm not sure whether having his attention in that way is a good thing or not, and the way my heart races at the sight of him confuses me.

Dion pushes off the wall and walks toward me, pausing right in front of me, his body so close to mine that my clothes nearly brush against his.

"You look tired," he murmurs as he lifts his hand to my face. His index finger traces over my dark circles, and I inhale sharply, confused by the tenderness he's showing me. He keeps catching me by surprise, and I'm not sure what to make of him. His concern is the last thing I expected.

"Dion, darling," Grandma Anne says. "I thought you couldn't make it?"

He looks up at his grandmother and nods. "I decided to re-prioritize."

What does that mean? Is this an act for his grandmother?

Grandma Anne smiles, her eyes sparkling in the way they did in the car, when she caught me staring at Maria. "We'll leave you to it, then," she says. "I doubt you need input from outsiders such as Maria and myself."

She nods at Maria and holds her arm out, gesturing toward the door in an obvious silent order to leave with her. Maria doesn't seem to notice, though. She's staring at Dion, but he hasn't taken his eyes off me for even a single moment.

My heart beats in my throat as I brace myself, though I'm not quite sure for what. Meanwhile, Dion continues to study me, his brows knitting together as his gaze roams over me. I can't tell what he's thinking, and I struggle to quiet my thoughts and worries. After several moments, I finally hear the door close behind me, and I flinch. "She won't like that," I murmur without thinking.

"Who won't like what?" he asks, his voice soft.

Dion takes another step closer to me, and I take a step back, the two of us continuing this dance until he's got me trapped against the wall behind me.

His body presses against mine, the top of my head barely reaching his shoulder. He smirks down at me as though he finds me endearing, and his hand threads through my hair.

I gasp when he tilts my face up toward his. “Explain,” he murmurs, his soft voice in contrast with the way he holds me.

My eyes widen, and my heart begins to race wildly. I don’t know how to navigate life with him. Despite his rough edges, he always makes me feel so safe — something about him tempts me into acting out, into speaking my mind.

“Maria,” I whisper. “The way she was speaking made it seem like she intends to spend a lot of time here. She won’t like being left out of the decorating decisions.”

I can’t explain why, but there’s a hint of hope entwined with my anxiety, as though part of me wishes he’ll put my worries to rest. Expects it, even. When I questioned him about the article in The Herald, he made it seem like there’s nothing between them, but her behavior made me question his sincerity.

Dion clenches his jaw and tightens his grip on my hair, his entire body tensing against mine. “I thought I told you I’m yours,” he tells me, his voice more of a low growl. “I don’t share, Faye. That works both ways. I thought I’d made that clear.”

“You don’t?” I ask, cautiously hopeful. I’ve always been worried that he’d have an endless string of mistresses, that I’d be nothing but a puppet to him, a doll to show off. Just as my fears had begun to abate, Maria reignited them.

“I don’t,” he clarifies. His eyes flash, and he hesitates for a moment. “I have no intention of being with anyone but you ever again. I’m not sure what she said, but I’ll speak to her and remind her that you’re the one I’m marrying. I’ll tell her I belong to you, and *only* you. Will that make you feel better?”

I nod at him hesitantly, my cheeks blazing and my heart pounding wildly. The relief I feel would’ve made my knees give in if I hadn’t been leaning back against the wall, Dion’s body pressed against mine. His continuous absence and the distance he always enforced between us painted a picture that is so vastly different from the one he’s presenting me with now, and though it should scare me, it does quite the opposite. Somehow, he’s made me stop fearing him and our future together.

Dion smiles and places his free hand on my jaw, his thumb brushing over the edge of my mouth. “Jealousy looks so beautiful on you, Faye.” I part my lips to deny his insinuation, but I find that I can’t, not when he’s looking at me with that knowing look in his eyes. “Keep being good for me, baby, and I’ll be good to you too. So good.”

His thumb brushes over my lip again, and I tense when I feel him harden against me. My heart is beating so loudly, I’m convinced he must hear it. Dion’s gaze drops to my mouth, and he inhales shakily, as though he’s doing his best to resist temptation.

I stare up at him, waiting, wanting, hoping for something I swore I’d never expect from him. He smiles and bites down on his lip, the image so sexy that I find myself clenching my thighs.

Dion sighs, and then he pushes away from the wall, putting some distance between us as he drags a hand through his thick dark hair.

He turns his back to me and stares up at the ceiling for a moment. When he faces me, his expression is as calm as it always used to be. “Faye,” he says, his voice soft. “If there’s one thing my parents taught my siblings and me about marriage, it’s that communication is key. I’m inclined to agree with that lesson, despite it not coming easy to me. Our marriage is an unconventional one. We’re starting off on the wrong foot entirely, and I have no intention of making a bad situation worse by letting misunderstandings fester.” He clenches his jaw and inhales deeply. “I didn’t treat you as my fiancée for years, in part because of your age. Because of it, I pushed you straight into another man’s arms. That won’t happen ever again, you hear me? You’re *mine* now, and I’m yours — exclusively. I don’t want there to be any confusion about that.”

The sincerity in his eyes renders me speechless, and all I can do is nod. Every time I’m alone with him, he ends up surprising and intriguing me, and it doesn’t appear to be a facade.

I don’t know what to make of it. I’ve known him for years, but I’m starting to realize that I don’t know him at all.

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Chapter Sixteen

Dion

I watch Faye's fingers move across the keys at a fascinating speed, a melody I don't recognize filling the air between us. She's yet to notice me standing in her piano room, and I take a moment to study her.

She's most beautiful when she's losing herself in her music. From where I'm standing, I notice her straight back, that dainty waist I love wrapping my hands around, and her beautiful long neck.

I've never noticed a woman's neck before, yet I'm noticing it when it's Faye. Every inch of her is breathtaking in an understated yet incredibly powerful way. Her beauty is the kind that makes you take note, that makes you lose your courage, because how could anyone ever stand a chance with someone like her?

Her eyes fall closed, and she smiles as the melody changes, the notes mellowing in a comforting way. It hits me then — she isn't the only one who's smiling.

For years, I couldn't stand to hear the sound of a piano, because it reminded me of my mother, and that, in turn, triggered the guilt I have yet to overcome. When did the sound of a piano become something I attributed to Faye, and not my mother? When did I begin to enjoy it again?

Faye sighs when she lifts her fingers off the ivories, the last note still ringing through the air. That satisfaction on her face… fuck. Does she have any idea how fucking sexy she looks right now?

I bite my bottom lip in an effort to suppress the sudden desire I feel, but it's to no avail. I can't stop the images that come to mind of her in my bed, that same satisfied smile on her lips, her body thoroughly satiated.

She tenses when she finally spots me, her eyes widening in shock. "Dion? What are you doing here?"

I've never visited her at home before, and I can tell she's flustered. I didn't think she could get any more beautiful, but that rosy blush does it. "I'm here to pick you up."

She slowly rises from her bench, her expression turning guarded. Even at home, she's perfectly dressed in the kind of outfit my sister would wear to work. Does she have plans today that I'm ruining? I'm the one who enforced the distance between us, but now I find myself curious about her. How does she spend her days? Clearly, practicing takes up most of her time, but what else does she do? What is it that makes her smile after a tough day?

She walks toward me, and I meet her halfway, my heart warming. I haven't seen her without heels in years, and I forgot just how tiny she is. Fucking adorable.

For a single moment, I wonder what it'll be like to have her legs wrapped around my waist, her body pressed against the wall as I push into her. She's so fucking tiny… I'd tear her apart.

"Pick me up?" she repeats, confused. "What for? I'm so sorry. I wasn't informed that I was expected anywhere. I can get ready in no time. I won't keep you waiting for long."

"Hawaii," I tell her, shrugging apologetically. "My grandmother informed me that you are to accompany us on our family trip to Hawaii. I'm as surprised as you are, to be honest. As it turns out, my grandmother royally screwed over Luca and Val, and now she's forcing us all to go on this family trip in some kind of misguided attempt to fix her wrongs." I shake my head and take a deep breath. "Honestly, most of the time, it's best not to wonder what goes on in my grandmother's mind. It's easiest to just do as she says. So here I am, picking you up."

Her eyes are twinkling, almost as though we're in on a secret together, and then she smiles. Fuck. Surely she knows what she does to me when she smiles like that? "Path of least resistance, huh?" she murmurs. "I know a thing or two about that."

She turns and walks out of her piano room, looking over her shoulder once to see if I'm following her. She seems more at ease around me, but the distance between us still feels unsurmountable most days.

Faye is quiet as she leads me up the stairs, and my gaze drops to her ass. Those fucking curves… goddamn. Was she always this beautiful?

"How long will we be away?" she asks, looking over her shoulder again.

I clear my throat awkwardly, worried she just caught me checking her out. While I haven't exactly hidden my desire for her, I don't want her to find me leering at her like some sort of fucking pervert either. "I was told to pack for three days, but you'd better pack for at least a week. I have no doubt my grandmother will keep us there until Luca and Val forgive her."

She nods and walks into her bedroom, and I follow her in, unable to suppress my curiosity. Her room is decorated beautifully, but it's devoid of personality. There are no photos or little trinkets that would tell me anything about her, and something about that just seems off. This might as well have been a hotel room. Even minimalists have a couple of personal items in their living spaces. If nothing else, shouldn't she have had a photo of her mother?

I watch her carefully as she packs. I expected her to question me about Luca and Val, or the resort we're going to, but instead she just moves quietly. I can never figure her out. She's unlike any other woman I've ever known. She seems entirely unaffected by me, and it throws me off. It makes me want to get a rise out of her. She was never meant to intrigue me the way she does, and the worst part is that it isn't even her intention to do so. She has absolutely no idea how often she's on my mind these days.

Faye was never meant to be more than an unwanted trophy wife, someone who was forced on me, someone I never intended to care about. Yet here I am, wanting to know what makes her tick.

"Does my father know about this trip?" she asks suddenly, her voice faltering.

"Yes, my grandmother informed him," I tell her as I take her suitcase from her. "He said he'd take care of your schedule." Something about her tone doesn't sit well with me. She's always been meek in her father's presence, and I'm only starting to realize how different she is when he isn't around. Is he merely strict, or is there more to it?

A hint of unease runs down my spine as I think back to how intimidated and *broken* she always seemed, when she clearly comes alive when we're alone. Something doesn't add up there. She shouldn't be more comfortable and outspoken with me than with her own family, especially considering our precarious relationship.

We're both silent as I lead Faye to my car, and she hesitates when I hold the door open for her. I wonder whether she realizes what traveling with me will entail. I should probably tell her we'll be sharing a room, but I'd much rather wait so I can see if her eyes will spit fire for me when she finds out. Something about riling her up just really makes my fucking day. It's twisted and fucked up, but I can't help myself.

That is what I'm worried about most. The way I can't help myself around her. I can't keep myself from wanting more of her than I deserve.

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Chapter Seventeen

Dion

I can barely focus on Luca and Val as they walk onto our private jet, shocked to find us all here. Grandma meant to surprise them, and I have a feeling she doesn't realize how unwelcome this *surprise* is.

She knows neither Luca nor Val wants to see her after everything she put them through, yet she forced us all onto this goddamn plane anyway.

My breathing accelerates as the plane pushes away from the gate, and I let my eyes fall closed. I wish I had medication on me, but I stopped taking that years ago. It made me feel too disoriented, and it messed with my short-term memory. Right now though, I wish I had it with me. None of my family members know I can't stand flying. They don't even suspect it. Why would they? I voluntarily get on a plane at least once a month, after all.

My body trembles slightly once we reach the runway, and nausea hits me hard. I force myself to breathe. If I let even the tiniest hint of my panic show, it'll only worry my siblings. I try my hardest to stay calm, telling myself that flying is one of the safest forms of transportation and that the pilot and co-pilot have both been vetted by me personally. Hell, I oversaw all the checks and made them triple check a handful of things. On top of that, Lex is here, and if need be, he can take over and fly this plane.

"Dion."

I blink and turn my face to find Faye staring at me, a hint of concern in her gaze. She reaches for me, slowly, hesitantly. Her hand brushes against

mine, and I instinctively entwine our fingers, holding onto her tightly.

She stares at me, her eyes filled with understanding and compassion. Faye doesn't ask questions — she never does. She just squeezes my hand tightly, and I twist my torso, turning toward her in our luxury leather seats.

"Faye," I murmur, my tone pleading, yet I'm uncertain what I'm asking for. Perhaps, for once, I don't want to be alone in my fears. I'm tired, and I want the solace that she doesn't even realize she's offering me. I sigh and drop my forehead to her shoulder, nearly covering her body with mine as I lean over her. She freezes, and just as I've begun to pull away from her again, her arms wrap around me and she hugs me tightly, pulling me closer.

I groan and bury my face against her neck, my lips brushing over her soft skin. She smells so fucking good, and I inhale deeper, eliciting a shiver from her. Coconut. That's what she smells like. Fucking delicious. I'm near fucking delirious as I press my lips against her pulse-point, focusing on the steady thrumming of her heart. Everything else melts away until there's only her.

"Better?" she whispers, for my ears only.

I hum noncommittally as turbulence shakes the plane. Her hand threads through my hair, and she holds onto me tightly. She owes me nothing, yet she didn't think twice before offering me her support, quietly keeping my secrets. I was so certain that I'd despise her for forcing me into a marriage that will only fuel my guilt, but she makes it impossible to do so. I don't understand why she affects me like no woman ever has. How is she able to calm the chaos in my mind?

She gently massages my head, and I nearly fucking moan. It's such a simple act, yet it isn't something any woman but her has ever done for me before. It fills me with an unfamiliar longing. It isn't just lust. It's more than that, and it fucking terrifies me.

I drop one hand to her leg and let it slip just underneath the hem of her skirt. The feel of her bare skin sends a jolt straight to my cock. Damn. Faye tenses, but she doesn't stop massaging my head, and she doesn't pull my hand away. Has she ever done this for anyone else? I've never been particularly possessive, but I fucking hate the thought of her sharing this kind of intimacy with Eric. Does he know what her fingers feel like against his scalp?

It's been a few weeks since they broke up, and all of a sudden, I need to know if she's spoken to him since. Twice now, she told me she hasn't, but

will she continue to keep her word?

Initially, it was just my pride that was hurt, but now it's more. She feels like *mine* now, and I don't even want her thoughts straying, let alone any other part of her.

The plane begins to shake again, and I tighten my grip on her leg, placing all of my focus on her. My lips part slightly, and I let my teeth graze against her skin, needing to know if she'll taste the way she smells. Faye's breath hitches as the tip of my tongue brushes against her skin, and she squirms in her seat.

I smile against her neck when she squeezes her legs together, trapping my hand in between them. She likes that, huh? I'm pleasantly surprised she's so sensitive.

I press a soft kiss just below her ear, and she draws a shaky breath, her hands balling into my hair as she grips tightly. "*Dion*," she whispers, and I can't tell if it's a plea or a warning. I don't think she's quite sure herself. I kiss her again, and she withdraws her hands before pushing against my shoulders slightly.

I pull back just enough to look at her, my face hovering over hers. I take in her beautiful rosy cheeks, and that wild look in her eyes. Fuck. I used to think she resembled a porcelain doll — perfect and lifelike, but soulless. I couldn't have been more wrong.

I smirk at her, and she averts her gaze, looking awfully flustered. I think I just developed a new hobby. Making her smile makes me feel fucking high, but that blush? I already can't wait to make her blush for me like that again. Fucking stunning.

"Thank you," I murmur.

Her eyes snap to mine, and she looks disarmed for a moment. "I… um…" she stammers.

"For distracting me," I clarify, unable to wipe the smirk off my face. When is the last time I smiled like this? I can't remember. "It helped, Faye."

She nods, a hint of shyness in her gaze. She truly is a work of art. How did I never see it before? Was it just because she was too young, or was I blinded by my guilt?

"Dion," she whispers, and my cock twitches again. I fucking love hearing her say my name. "You really seem to struggle with flying, but don't you… don't you fly all the time?"

The smile melts off my face, and I straighten in my seat, turning my head away to look out the window, my hand still on her thigh. “Yeah,” I murmur. “I do.”

“Why?”

Because I deserve to suffer. Because I’m the reason you lost your mother before you ever even had a chance to get to know her. Because I’m the reason my sister won’t get to walk down the aisle on our father’s arm.

“My job requires it,” I tell her, giving her as much honesty as I can bear right now.

Faye places her hand over mine, and for a moment, I’m certain it’s to remove my hand from her leg, but instead, she laces her fingers with mine. Unlike every other woman in my life, she doesn’t demand further answers.

She isn’t what I was expecting, and I’m unsure what to do with that. I dislike things that I can’t understand or predict. I don’t like surprises or deviations in my life, and she’s the biggest one of all.

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Chapter Eighteen

DION

My body is taut with anticipation as Faye and I walk into our room. I watch her carefully, my heart pounding wildly.

She clears her throat awkwardly as she looks around, and while she takes in our plunge pool, jacuzzi, and deck, I study *her*. I'm captivated as she walks through the room, until she finally pauses beside our bed. I've never been so enchanted by a woman, and I have no idea what to do about it.

Her cheeks are bright red as she raises her head to look at me, her eyes flickering with an emotion I can't quite read but want to learn more about. Is it shyness? Coyness? Or is it simply intrigue?

"This seems a little… inappropriate," she murmurs, her voice a pitch higher than usual.

Fluster. She's flustered, and it might very well be my new favorite look on her. "Yeah?" I murmur. "Go ahead and tell my grandmother. She's the one who arranged our accommodation. If you tell her you can't share with me, I'm sure she'll arrange a new room for you."

Faye's eyes widen, and that porcelain mask of hers cracks, revealing her frustration in response to my words. For a moment, I wonder if she'll actually march out of here to demand a new room. If she did, what would Grandma do? I'd pay good money to witness that conversation.

She grits her teeth and throws me a glare, unaware of the way my cock springs to attention when she looks at me that way, showing me her true feelings. I'm determined to unravel her, piece by piece.

I watch as she forces her mask back into place, her anger draining away until there's nothing left but that demure expression I've come to hate. I crave realness from her with such debilitating ferocity, and I'm uncertain why. Something about provoking her makes me feel alive on days when breathing seems too hard. Maybe it's because I recognize the hidden pain in her empty eyes, or maybe it's simply because I'm a selfish fucking asshole seeking salvation in the one woman who holds the power to destroy me.

Faye looks up at me, and I can't quite read her expression. Any intimacy that we fostered on the plane is gone, replaced with trepidation. "I understand that we'll be married soon, and once we are, I won't deny you anything. But until then, would it be okay if I ask you to refrain from touching me? I didn't really mind it during our flight, because it genuinely seemed to help you, but I… I don't want…"

Me. She doesn't want *me*.

The rejection stings more than I expected it to, but I smile nonetheless as I walk toward her. "Are you telling me you'll spread those pretty legs for me on our wedding night?" I murmur, reaching for her. I grab a strand of her hair and wrap it around my finger, all the while wishing I could have more of her.

Faye looks up at me, and that shy gaze of hers just floors me. "I… I just… I assumed you would…"

I smirk at her and let her hair slip through my fingers. "There's nothing I'd want more," I whisper. "Do you have any idea how many times a day I think of you in my bed? It doesn't matter what I'm doing. I could be in a meeting with several industry leaders, and my thoughts will turn to you. *You*, Faye. The way you'll taste when I finally kiss you for the first time, or the way you'll sound when you come for me. Sometimes, when my thoughts wander, they simply lead me to memories of the way you laughed at the charity gala, and I find myself thinking of ways to make you do that again. You, my darling fiancée, are on my mind entirely too often, and I'm not sure I like it."

When did it happen? When did she begin to dominate my thoughts against my wishes? I could lie to myself and say it was at The Lacara, when I had her thighs wrapped around my waist and my hands on her body in a

way I'd never had them before. Or I could finally admit to myself that she's been invading my mind from the moment I danced with her at Ares's wedding nearly two years ago. She'd looked completely unrecognizable, as though she'd grown into an entirely new person. The only thing that remained unchanged was that impenetrable mask of hers. I'd held her against me, and with one single touch, she tore through the first layer of my defenses. I doubled down and evaded her harder than ever before, shocked by her ability to affect me, only for her to fucking obliterate me with a single teardrop.

Faye looks taken-aback, her pretty lips parted just a little, as though she never would've imagined that I think of her at all. It makes me wonder just how she views me. What kind of picture did I paint throughout the years when I ignored and neglected her? How do I undo it?

She glances back at our bed, and I follow her gaze. I can't even remember the last time I shared a bed with someone. Falling asleep with a woman always seemed far more intimate than simply giving into desire. Besides, these days, my nightmares haunt me more and more frequently. Faye has already seen the way flying affects me, and I'm hardly thrilled about that. The last thing I want is for her to discover more of my weaknesses. Perhaps it would've been better not to share a room, after all. All I can do is hope the nightmares don't wake me. I'm not sure how I'd explain them.

I glance at the welcome pack the staff left on the table for us and reach for the champagne bottle, eager to divert her attention and settle her nerves. "How about we open this up? We have the evening to ourselves, and I can do with a drink after that dreadful flight."

Before we disembarked, Grandma informed us that we're all expected at breakfast tomorrow morning, but thankfully, she didn't insist on forcing us together for dinner. I'm sure Luca and Val need some time together to process everything Grandma told them earlier today. She basically admitted to playing them for years. It might have been for their own good, but someone like Luca won't see it that way. It makes me wonder what kind of fucked up game my grandmother must be playing with Faye and me.

Faye looks at me, her gaze uncertain. "Can we?" she asks, her eyes moving to the bottle in my hands.

I blink in surprise, confused by the question. "Why can't we?"

She shakes her head, her cheeks turning perfectly rosy once again. “I’d love to, I mean,” she tells me, her voice soft. She hesitates then, her arms wrapping around herself. “Dion, may I take a shower first? The flight was a little longer than I expected, and I’d really love to freshen up a little if that’s okay?”

I frown at her. Why would she need my permission for something like that? “Of course,” I murmur, unsure of what else to say.

She nods at me and disappears into the walk-in-wardrobe, leaving me feeling unsettled. Maybe I should’ve checked if I could arrange a separate room for her after all. I figured there’s no point in postponing the inevitable, but perhaps she needs more time to adjust to this mad situation. We’ve had most of our lives to come to terms with our upcoming marriage, but now that we’re only a few months removed from it, reality is finally sinking in for me. It must be the same for her, too. The only difference is that I’m starting to look forward to everything she’s dreading.

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Chapter Nineteen

Dion

I lift my towel to my wet hair as I walk out of the bathroom and into our suspiciously silent bedroom. For a moment, I wonder if Faye decided to get a room of her own after all, but then I notice movement through the large sliding doors.

I pause and take a moment to study her, enjoying my position outside of her field of vision. She's in a short black silky nightgown that clings to her body with every move, and even from here, I can tell she's still every bit as flustered as she was earlier. I'm not sure if the champagne will ease her nerves or make it worse.

Faye looks up when I walk out, her eyes widening when they land on my mostly bare body. I'm in nothing but a pair of black boxer shorts, and that look on her face does wonders for my ego.

I glance down at myself and cup the back of my neck. "I don't wear pajamas to bed, and I was in such a rush when I packed that I forgot to bring loungewear. Like you, I was given very little notice. If you're uncomfortable, I can put my suit back on."

"N-no," she says, dragging her gaze away, her cheeks flushed. "I didn't mean to stare. I'm so sorry."

I throw her a roguish smirk and shake my head. "You can, you know? You're the only woman in the world that has every right to stare as much as you want. I'm yours, after all."

Her eyes widen a fraction, and I bite back a smile as I grab the champagne bottle that she carried outside. I'm acutely aware of her as I pop the cork off, noting the way she jumps in surprise. I hand her a glass and hold up my own. "We should probably toast, but to what?"

She tilts her head slightly, lost in thought for a moment. She looks so beautiful standing here, that black silk clinging to her bare nipples and her long wavy hair falling around her small frame like some kind of dark fucking halo. Her beauty is surreal, and I have to force myself to look away.

"To summer breezes, new experiences, and *us*," she whispers eventually. "Whatever that may entail."

A soft, amused huff escapes my lips, and I clink my glass to hers, our eyes locked. "To us, Faye."

I watch her as we both take a sip, and the way she smiles into her glass makes my heart beat a little faster. It's so rare for her to smile in my presence that I find myself savoring the moment.

Faye sits down on the big round lounge bed in the corner, and I seat myself next to her, her thigh brushing against mine. We fall into a comfortable silence, both of us sipping our champagne as the sound of waves crashing fills the air, a soft breeze making her hair dance.

Every once in a while, her gaze darts over my abs and down my legs, her breathing erratic. She's never looked more beautiful, and fuck, I've never been happier to get checked out. I don't even think she realizes she's doing it. It's odd, but I've never felt quite so *at peace*. Just existing with her in the moment is enough for me.

"Faye," I murmur, my thoughts drifting to our future. "How do you feel about our upcoming marriage?" I'm not even sure why I'm asking that question. All I know is that I need an answer.

From the moment I saw her with Eric, I was worried that our marriage would be filled with resentment, but we seem okay so far. She seems to dislike our circumstances as much as I do, but I don't think she's blaming me personally, as I thought she might. I guess what I'm really asking is how she feels about *me*. It might not seem like it to her, but in the past few weeks, I've been trying to be a better man. It feels ridiculous to even try, yet she makes me want to.

Faye stares at her empty glass. I refill it just to keep my restless hands busy, and she knocks back half of it before she turns to look at me.

“Scared,” she admits, her voice trembling as her gaze fills with uncertainty. “I’m scared, Dion.”

My heart sinks, and I tip back my own champagne glass as I mull over her words. “Do *I* scare you?” I ask, my voice soft.

“Yes,” she whispers. “But not in the way you think.”

I put my glass away and lie down on the lounge bed in an effort not to tower over her. I lie back and watch her through lowered lashes, uncertain how to reply, how to settle her fears. It’s hardly surprising that she finds me intimidating. It isn’t just my height and frame, it’s because I’ve inadvertently shown her sides of me I hide from everyone else. My usual polite and friendly demeanor melts away the moment she does anything that I didn’t quite see coming, which is happening more and more often.

I reach for her hesitantly, the tips of my fingers brushing over her cheek. “Tell me,” I murmur, my voice soft and coaxing. “How do I scare you? Tell me, so I can try to change.”

Faye looks down at me, her eyes flitting over my body, before finally settling on my face. “You… you make me feel like I’m in stasis, like I’m just waiting for the other shoe to drop. I don’t understand you, and I don’t like that. I’m aware that you can’t get access to your inheritance until we’re married, and I’m scared of what will happen to me once you no longer need me. I’d rather have your cruelty now, than be lulled into a false sense of security. I’m scared you’re playing some kind of elaborate game, trying to keep me happy until the wedding, and after that, you’ll punish me for what I did. If you’re going to hurt me, I’d rather you do it now. It’s not like I can run away, you know? I’m as trapped in this arrangement as you are.”

I stare up at her in surprise and reach for her hand. My touch gentles as I entwine our fingers. “Those fears will never come to pass, Faye. I swear it. I won’t punish you for having a life prior to our marriage, just like I’ve had mine. What right do I have to do that?”

She studies me, a spark of hope in those stunning blue eyes. I want her to keep looking at me that way, like she’s taking a chance on me, like she’s choosing to trust me.

“And for what it’s worth,” I whisper. “You scare me too.”

Her lips part, and a soft, surprised sound escapes her throat. “I do?”

I nod. “You’re nothing like what I expected. I thought I knew you, but every second we spend together further proves that I don’t. You scare me, because so far I’m liking what I’m discovering. Even worse… I want to

find out more. I want to know what hides behind every single one of your fake smiles, what makes you tick, what makes you happy. I'm dying to find out what makes you moan, how you'll feel. I need to know if I can make you gasp the way you did when I kissed your neck on the plane, and which other parts of your body are sensitive. I never expected to want you, and the fact that I do… the fact that I want more than just your body, it's fucking terrifying."

She looks away, but she can't hide the blush that extends all the way to the tips of her ears. Fucking adorable. I smirk as she reaches for the champagne bottle, her hand trembling as she refills her glass.

"Did you see the retraction The Herald published?" I ask carefully. "I demanded they clarify the rumors they instigated about Maria and me. I even supplied additional photos for them to print, proving she and I were neither alone nor on holiday. I won't hurt you if I can help it, Faye. Not even indirectly or unintentionally. I'm going to be good to you. So fucking good that you won't even remember that fucker. Everything he made you feel, everything he gave you, will pale in comparison to what we'll have."

Her eyes widen in surprise and her hand slips, causing some of her champagne to spill onto my chest. I gasp as the cold liquid hits my skin, and she turns toward me, drawing herself up on her knees. "I'm so sorry!" she says as she reaches over me, her hands swiping across my chest. She's so flustered and apologetic that she doesn't realize what view she's presenting me with — those flushed cheeks and her wild hair combined with the way her nightgown gapes near her chest as she bends over me, exposing the tips of dark nipples. *Fuck*.

I grab her wrist and hold it in place, my heart racing. "*This*," I whisper. "This is why you fucking terrify me, my darling fiancée."

She looks at me without an ounce of comprehension, and I lock my jaw as I slowly move her palm down my body, letting her feel the ridges of my abs. Her gaze follows our joint hands as the liquid spreads over my skin, and her breathing rapidly turns shallow.

She inhales sharply as I rest her hand over my boxers, my rock-hard cock pressing against her palm. I expected her to pull her hand away as though I scalded her, but instead, she stares at me, disbelief in her eyes.

"You terrify me because you have no fucking idea what you do to me. You make me feel out of control, when control is the one thing I value most in life. When I'm around you, I can barely think straight, Faye. You drive

me fucking crazy, and I wish, I fucking wish my need for you was only physical. If I could fuck you out of my system, I would." I reposition her hand just a little and wrap her fingers around my cock, making her hold it tightly, my hand over hers. She just stares at me as though she's as drunk on me as I am on her, as though she's waiting to see if I'll take it any further, as though she *wants* me to.

I let go of her hand, but she doesn't pull away. Her grip around my cock remains tight, her lips slightly parted as desire flickers through her eyes. I thought she couldn't get more beautiful when I first saw her laugh, but it turns out I was wrong. This. I doubt I'll ever get enough of this.

My hands wrap around her waist, and she tenses, seemingly snapping out of her daze. I smirk as I lift her on top of me, until she's straddling me, my cock nestled right between her thighs.

She gasps, and the way her hips buck fucking undoes me. "D-Dion," she stutters, her voice husky and oh so fucking sexy.

"You made a mess of me," I murmur. "Don't you think you should clean me up?"

She swallows hard and places a trembling hand against my chest. The way her fingers move over my abs can only be described as caressing. She could've made quick work of wiping away the champagne, but instead, she takes her time exploring my body.

She tenses when I place my hand on her thigh, but she doesn't stop me as I slide it up and under her dress, pausing at her hip. My fingers brush against the lace fabric of her panties, and she shifts against me, her movements betraying her need. She drives me fucking wild with her innocent little touches. "I can't," I whisper, tightening my grip on her. Her breath hitches when I sit up with her still in my lap, bringing my body close to hers. "I can't resist you for a single second longer."

My gaze drops to her lips, and she shifts on top of me, driving me fucking wild. My touch is possessive as I slide my hand up to her waist, making her nightgown ride up.

She gasps, and I lean in a fraction, my nose brushing against hers. "Tell me no, Faye," I plead. "If you don't want me to kiss you, I need you to tell me no."

She inhales shakily, remaining silent. I wait a beat, and then another, but she doesn't move away. Instead, my beautiful fiancée glances at my mouth,

as though she wants this as much as I do. Fuck. I'm a mere mortal, incapable of resisting her divinity, and she must know that.

I lean in and take those pouty, sexy lips of hers, finally making them mine. She tastes just as good as I always thought she would — sweet, innocent, fucking delicious. I groan and brush my tongue over her lips, and she opens up for me. Her arms move around my neck, and I nearly fucking lose it. I've never wanted anyone quite this bad.

My tongue brushes against hers, and there's something so fucking alluring about her tentative touches, the way she tries to meet me stroke for stroke. Fuck. If this is the way she kisses me, I won't survive it if she ever puts that mouth anywhere near my cock.

Faye whimpers into my mouth, and I nip at her lips, needing more. My hand trails to her hipbone and down, until the tips of my fingers graze against the fabric between her thighs. I smile against her mouth when I find it soaked through. "Dion," she moans. "Stop, please, I—"

I instantly pull my lips off hers and drop my forehead to her shoulder, my breathing ragged. "I'm sorry," I whisper. "I should've taken it slower."

She gently shakes her head, and the fact that she doesn't reject me completely soothes my soul. I hold on to her tightly, my arms wrapping around her waist as I hug her to me, my lips pressed against her neck. I can't let her go just yet. I need this moment to last a little longer, just a second longer. "You're so good for me," I whisper. "So perfect, so delicious."

She whimpers softly, the sound needy and pleased, as though my praise is exactly what she needed. She relaxes in my hold, and something about that just hits me so fucking hard. That level of trust is so much more impactful than the mind-blowing kiss we just shared, and the fact that she affects me in that way is exactly why she fucking terrifies me.

"Go," I whisper in her ear, my hold loosening. "Go to bed, baby. I'll stay out here a little while longer."

I need a moment or ten to compose myself. If I go anywhere near her again with my cock throbbing, I'll want another kiss, and every instinct in my body is screaming at me to take it slow with her.

"Thank you," she whispers, her voice so soft I would've missed her words if I weren't holding her so tightly. She pushes away just slightly, and I loosen my hold, my eyes finding hers. Fuck. It's unreal how beautiful she

is tonight, and knowing that I put that look in her eyes is such a rush. “For not… for not making me…”

I freeze, my lust draining away. “You thought I’d force you?” I ask, pained.

She shakes her head vehemently, but I see the doubt in her eyes. “I just… I wasn’t sure…”

I gently cup her cheek and sigh. “Faye, by the time I fuck you, you’ll be begging for it. I won’t take you a moment sooner, no matter how much I might want to.”

She draws a shaky breath and then she does the most wonderful thing. She smiles at me and leans in, a shy look in her eyes as she presses a sweet kiss to my cheek. I don’t think I’ve blushed in years, yet that’s exactly what she makes me do as she scrambles off my lap and disappears into our bedroom.

The door slides closed behind her, and I fall back onto the bed, grinning like a fool. I’m well and truly fucked.

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Chapter Twenty

FAYE

A moan escapes my lips as I shift in my sleep, vaguely aware of the throbbing between my legs. I tilt my hips, trying to alleviate the ache, and a soft groan startles me fully awake.

"Faye," Dion moans, his arms tightening around me, keeping me captive. I'm sprawled all over him, my lips brushing against his chest. One of my legs is wrapped around his hip, almost as though I tried to climb him in my sleep. My heart races as mortification washes over me.

He's hard, and my movements placed him right between my legs. He's pushing up against me the way he did when he kissed me, and I'm just as wet as I was then. I never expected to want Dion, and it's making me feel incredibly conflicted. How could I want someone that I've always resented?

"Don't move, baby," Dion murmurs, slowly burying one hand in my hair while the other moves down my back. He groans again when he cups my ass, gently rolling his hips into me. "You feel so good."

More heat rushes through me at his words, and the throbbing intensifies. He sounds so pleased, so satiated. Dion slowly kneads my ass, and I shift against him, my lips moving up his neck, until they're settled right below his ear. I didn't mean to move, to rub up against him that way… I did it entirely without thinking.

"Faye," Dion warns, and I still in his embrace, letting his sleepy voice wash over me. He sighs happily when I relax against him, his breathing

slowly evening out again.

When he came to bed last night, he left so much space between us, but somehow, we both ended up in the middle, our bodies entwined. Is this what our mornings will be like once we're married? I thought I'd hate it, that it'd be even more awkward than it actually is.

Last night, Dion told me I'm nothing like what he expected, but the reverse is true too. I thought that all powerful men are like my father — controlling, aggressive, selfish. Dion is making me wonder if I'm mistaken. When I told him he scares me, I failed to tell him that it isn't just for the reasons I mentioned. It's also because he gives me hope, and that's the one thing I never expected to have.

He shifts a little in his sleep, and I slip out of his embrace carefully, my movements quiet as I get out of bed. The sheets are bunched around his hips, his entire upper body on display for me. I didn't dare look at him too much last night, but he truly is incredibly muscular. I've always known Dion is handsome, but my resentment never allowed me to appreciate it. I tear my gaze away and tiptoe to the bathroom, trying my best to ignore my pounding heart.

I was worried the sound of the shower would wake him, but by the time I walk back into the bedroom, he's still fast asleep, his arm covering his face. It's odd to think that I'm marrying him in three months. I spent so much time hating the idea of him that I never stopped to consider the man underneath.

I grab my phone to check the time, and it begins to vibrate in my hand. My stomach drops when I see Eric's name flash across the screen, and my eyes dart to Dion, but he hasn't so much as stirred.

I thought Eric had given up on calling me, and in some ways, it brought me relief to no longer see his name in my missed calls. Why is he calling me again? Why *now*?

I glance back at Dion one more time before quietly slipping through the glass sliding doors that lead to the beach, my heart racing in a different rhythm than before. I sigh in relief when my phone stops ringing, guilt putting me on edge.

I enjoyed being with Dion last night, and for a few hours, I didn't even think of Eric at all. I was too lost in the moment, and I'm not sure how to feel about that.

My phone buzzes again, and I'm snapped out of my thoughts, realization dawning. I'd been thinking about Dion *again*.

ERIC

Is it true?

I click on the link he sent me, my stomach dropping when I read the headline in The Herald. They published a photo of Dion holding the car door open for me in front of my house. I didn't even see any photographers, so how did this happen?

DION WINDSOR ENGAGED TO RENOWNED PIANIST FAYE MATTHEWS

Dion Windsor has been spotted back home in the States more often than usual in recent months, and now we finally know why. A representative of the Windsor family confirmed that Dion is engaged to be married to an old family friend, Faye Matthews. This explains Mr. Windsor's insistence that we retract the rumors about his secretary and him. Looks like we were right about the wedding bells — just not who they were ringing for.

The elusive billionaire lives in London, but we have it on good authority that he's back home for the foreseeable future. It appears the Windsor family has Faye to thank for bringing Dion back home. The piano prodigy is one of the world's youngest concert pianists — an impressive match for the Windsor heir.

Our reporters are working hard on finding out more about Dion and Faye's relationship, but so far, we've come up empty. Surely, there must be a story here. After all, at 22, Faye is a full ten years younger than Dion. It also hasn't escaped our notice that the pianist has not been spotted with a ring

yet. When asked about it, her representatives refused to comment. How utterly scandalous. We'll continue to dig, and you'll be the first to read all about it, dear readers.

My heart pounds wildly, my thoughts whirling. Our engagement was kept a secret for years due to my age, much to my father's dismay. He was certain the Windsors refused to formally acknowledge me as Dion's fiancée so they could change their mind if I ever stepped out of line. Maybe that's true, but I suspect it was more about privacy. The Windsors are constantly accosted by the media, and they shielded me from all of that for as long as they could. I always knew it couldn't last forever, but I didn't expect our engagement to be announced so suddenly.

My phone rings again, and I hesitate. When Eric and I broke up, he walked away before I had a chance to explain myself. I'd been choking back my sobs, and he'd looked so heartbroken. I know I owe him an explanation, but nothing I can say will make this situation better.

"Hello?"

"Faye," he says, and my heart begins to ache. It's been so long since I last heard his voice, and I missed him more than I realized. "Is it true?"

I inhale shakily and stare at the ocean, the sound of waves crashing filling my ears. "Yes," I admit, my voice breaking. "But it isn't what you think."

Eric laughs, the sounds grating. "Throughout our entire relationship, you were engaged to Dion? I know he's always had a fiancée. Was it you?"

I blink back the tears that are gathering in my eyes and take a deep breath. "It's something that was arranged by our parents, Eric. Our mothers… they were best friends, and they arranged this when we were kids. He knows I don't want to marry him, and it's the same for him. We're both being forced into this. If… if things were what you think they are, Dion wouldn't have reacted the way he did that day in the hotel. He wouldn't have been so calm, so unaffected."

"Faye," he murmurs, his voice filled with the same longing I'm feeling. "He wasn't *unaffected*. I've known Dion for years. I might be a little younger than him, but our fathers were friends, so I know what he's like.

That day… that's the angriest I've ever seen him. Nothing ever fazes him, but the way he looked at us… I should've realized it then. His barely restrained anger should've clued me in, but maybe I just wanted to be deceived."

I swallow hard as a tear runs down my cheek. "I n-never meant to deceive you," I tell him, my tone pleading. "I know it's hard for you to believe, but every moment between us was real. If I could go back in time, I'd do it again. I wouldn't trade the memories we made for anything."

"I wouldn't either," he says. "But Faye—"

I gasp when my phone is ripped out of my hand and whirl around to find Dion standing behind me, his eyes blazing with anger. "One chance," he murmurs, his gaze trailing over my face. "I gave you one single chance, and you blew it."

"Dion," I whisper, shocked.

I watch as he ends the call and stares at my phone. "You'd do it all over again if you could?" he asks, his voice soft, pained.

"I… Dion…" I stammer, unsure what to do or say. He asked me to never speak to Eric again, and I let him down. "I just wanted to explain."

He grabs my chin and tips my face up toward his, his gentle touch in contrast with the anger in his eyes. "Oh yeah?" he murmurs. "You just wanted to explain that you're being forced to marry me? You just wanted to make it clear that you don't want me?"

His hand moves into my hair, and he holds me tightly, his touch possessive. "Certainly didn't fucking seem that way when you moaned against my lips last night, writhing in my lap like you were desperate for my cock. Didn't really seem that way when I woke up this morning either, with your sweet little body all over mine. Did you think I didn't realize how fucking wet your pussy was for me? The way you were pressing up against me, like you wanted nothing more than for me to push my cock deep inside you… yeah, it definitely seemed like you didn't want me."

Mortification washes over me, and for a moment, I stop thinking clearly, my emotions getting the best of me. "Maybe I just forgot who I was in bed with."

Dion's expression contorts in pain for a split-second, before he schools his features. He drags me closer until my body is pressed against his. "You're testing my patience," he warns, his eyes dropping to my lips. "Three months until you become my wife, Faye. You have until then to

forget about him. If you don't, you'd better believe I'll fuck every memory of him out of you, until all you can think of is me. I'll have you screaming my name, over and over again, and then I'll make you beg for more."

I gasp, and he smirks, though there's no humor in his eyes. Dion gently cups my face, his thumb brushing over my bottom lip. I can feel him harden against my stomach, and my cheeks instantly flush. "Yeah," he whispers. "I'm gonna fuck you so good, you'll never want anyone else. Just because this isn't what we wanted doesn't mean we can't make the best of it, Faye. I have every intention of enjoying you."

He pulls away a little, his gaze dropping to my phone in his hands. He grits his teeth and throws me a withering glare before pulling his arm back and hurling my phone into the ocean. My lips part in shock, my eyes widening.

"I'll wait three months, but not a second longer. From the moment you take my last name, you'll be mine. Every fucking inch of you. The sooner you come to terms with it, the better."

"Are you insane?" I yell, finally snapping out of it. "H-how… how could you?"

He pins me down with a stare and smiles. "Insane? Baby, you don't know the half of it."

Then he brushes past me, leaving me staring after him, my heart pounding wildly and my body heated.

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Chapter Twenty-One

DION

"What's going on between Faye and you?" Zane asks as Lexington pours me a whiskey. I look up in surprise, and both of my brothers smile knowingly.

The three of us are hidden away in Lex's room, trying our best to evade Sierra. My sister has taken it upon herself to plan Val's dream wedding here, since Luca and Val eloped and never got to have a real wedding of their own. It's turned her into even more of a tyrant than usual.

"Nothing," I murmur, lying. It isn't just Sierra I'm avoiding. It's Faye too. Overhearing that phone call fucked with me, and I keep wondering whether she truly was thinking of Eric that morning. Did she think I was him? Is that why she climbed on top of me like that?

Every night since, she's stayed on her own side of the bed, the two of us having gone back to being polite and distant with each other. It's weird because I barely even know her, but I miss her. I hate that vacant look in her eyes, like she's just going through the motions, wary of me. This time, I only have myself to blame for it. I shouldn't have snapped at her like that, but fuck, hearing her tell Eric that she's being forced to marry me after the way I had her in my lap the night before? It fucking wrecked me.

"So there's no story behind this?" Lex asks as he holds up a box with his company's latest phone in it. It isn't even coming out yet for another few months, and maybe, just maybe, it'll temper Faye's anger a little.

He pushes it toward me, and I swirl the whiskey in my glass. “I threw her phone in the ocean.”

Zane’s eyes widen, and Lex bursts out laughing. “What the fuck happened to the plan?” Lex asks. “Weren’t you supposed to be nice and win her over? This environment is literally perfect for seduction, and you go and throw her phone into the fucking ocean?”

I shrug. “I had a diver retrieve it. I didn’t litter.”

Zane shakes his head. “I think you’re missing the point here,” he tells me.

“I wish I had the Lex-Board,” Lex muses.

“We’re not calling it that,” Zane snaps, rolling his eyes.

I grab the phone box and stare at it for a moment, sighing. Luca and Val’s wedding prep has given both Faye and me an excuse to ignore each other, even when we’re in the same space. We’re only ever really alone at night, and she just goes straight to bed, pretending to be asleep whenever I try to talk to her.

I shouldn’t have gotten so angry at her. It was never my intention to intimidate her, but fuck, I need her to know she can’t fuck around on me. The mere thought of her with Eric makes my fucking blood boil. I wasn’t joking when I said I’d make her forget about him.

I always hated the idea of having to marry her, but somehow, I now find myself counting down the days. 74 days until I officially get to call her mine. That’s all the time I’m giving her to get over him.

I empty my glass and rise to my feet, Faye’s new phone in my hands. I owe her an apology, and a new phone.

“Dion,” Zane calls when I reach the door. I look over my shoulder to find both of my brothers staring at me with blatant concern in their eyes. “Please don’t fuck this up any further, hmm? Faye is a nice girl, and it can’t be easy for her being forced into this. You got to spend your twenties fucking around, but she never got to live a life that isn’t tied to you. Just… just keep that in mind, okay?”

I nod and walk out, feeling conflicted. Fuck. Of course I fucking know that. I’ve always known this marriage will cost her more than it will me. I never intended to be selfish with her, because I know I’m the last person that deserves her, but all of my plans went down the drain the moment she smiled at me wearing that sexy blue dress. Until then, I was convinced marrying her would be simple, that it’d be easy to keep my distance and do

the bare minimum to comply with my grandmother's terms — but that isn't enough for me anymore. I want all of her. I want to make her *mine*, truly, selfishly.

The shower is running when I walk into our room, and I lean back against the wall, my eyes on the round lounge bed outside. Our first night here was fucking perfect. How do we go back to that?

Faye walks out of the bathroom wrapped in a fluffy towel, a gasp escaping those beautiful lips of hers when she sees me. "I thought you said you'd be back late," she says, her cheeks flushing as she clutches her towel.

"You're really fucking beautiful, you know that?" I murmur thoughtlessly.

Her eyes widen, and her cheeks get redder. She looks away, but I see the way the edges of her lips tip into a small smile. It's crazy, but making her smile truly has become one of my favorite hobbies.

"I… I didn't think… I didn't think you ever noticed me that way," she admits, her voice conveying her confusion. I suppose I've been sending her contrasting signals — for years I ignored her, so now she must find it hard to believe that I truly want her.

I push off the wall and walk toward her, making her take a step back, until she's pressed against the closed bathroom door, her eyes filled with something that makes my cock painfully hard. *Seventy-four days*. The wait might just kill me.

"Did you not hear me when I said I'll fuck you so good you won't be able to think of anyone but me?" I lean in, placing my forearms on either side of her head and caging her in.

Faye's breathing quickens, and she places her hands palms flat against my chest. For a moment, I think she'll push me away, but she doesn't. She just looks into my eyes, the blues in them brighter than usual. "Or did you miss the part where I told you I'll make you beg for more?" I murmur, bending down a little to bring my face closer to hers. Her breath hitches, and her lips part a little. "I'm counting down the days, baby. Seventy-four days until you're mine. I can't wait to make you come all over my cock, Faye. I'm going to tease you until your pussy is dripping for me and desperation flickers through those beautiful eyes of yours."

My hands move to her waist, and she gasps when I lift her up against the wall, her legs wrapping around my hips instinctively. Once again, she doesn't protest. She just stares at me, spellbound, her breath coming out in

little pants. “You’re so fucking tiny, beautiful girl. Do you think you’ll be able to take my cock?”

I grind my hips into her, settling my rock-hard cock right between her legs. She gasps, her tongue darting out to wet her lips. Fuck. How the fuck am I supposed to survive the next few months?

She slides her hands up until she’s got her arms wrapped around my neck. Her towel comes undone, and the top of her breasts comes into view. It’s unfortunate that the rest of it is wedged between us, secured into place. I need more, and I think she does too.

“Faye,” I whisper, half delirious. What is it about her that makes me lose control? She drives me fucking crazy. “You have no idea how much I want you,” I murmur, tilting my head until my lips brush against hers.

She gasps and averts her face, denying me a kiss. Fuck. I sigh and press my lips just below her ear, kissing her where I know she’s sensitive. “Seventy-four days,” I whisper, and she nods, the tips of her fingers brushing over the back of my neck. “That’s all the time you have left, baby.”

I pull away a little to look at her, both of us breathing hard. “This isn’t what I came here to do,” I admit. “But one look at you, and I lose all reason.”

“W-what did you come for then?” she asks, her voice husky. She’s so fucking sexy, it’s unreal.

“I came to apologize,” I murmur, dropping my forehead to hers. I breathe her in, loving the scent of my body wash on her. “I shouldn’t have gotten mad at you, and I definitely shouldn’t have thrown away your phone. I’m sorry, Faye.”

She tightens her grip on me and inhales shakily. “I’m sorry too,” she whispers. “I broke my promise, and there’s no excuse for that. I truly only picked up because I wanted to explain myself after the article The Herald posted, but I shouldn’t have. I… I let you down, and I’m sorry. We might not be married yet, but we will be, and I know that. I know the past has to stay where it belongs. This won’t happen again.”

I pull back a little to look into her eyes, taking in her sincerity. “It better not,” I murmur, the underlying warning clear. “You won’t like the consequences if you ever break my trust again. I’ll walk away from everything I have before I let you cheat on me. I won’t share you.”

She nods, surprise flickering through her eyes, as though she can't believe that I truly do want her, that I care whether or not she's mine, and mine alone. "You have my word," she whispers.

I nod and carefully let her down, my heart pounding wildly. Faye clutches her towel and leans back against the wall, as though she's unsteady on her feet, and I can't help but smirk. She might not let me kiss her again, but she wants me to. That's enough for me, for now.

I feel her gaze on me as I walk back toward our bed, hesitating for a moment before I grab the phone I had flown in for her. "Here," I tell her. "To replace your old one."

She takes it from me with trembling hands, her brows rising. "This isn't out yet," she murmurs. "Even the design hasn't been confirmed."

I nod. "Yeah, probably best not to get photographed with it for now. I already set it up for you." I don't mention that I blocked Eric's number and saved my own number as *Husband*. She'll figure it out herself, eventually.

I smile as I imagine her eyes when the phone screen lights up with an incoming call from me. Would she be dismayed, embarrassed, excited? Either way, it's bound to make that fire dance in her eyes, and I'm sad I'll miss seeing it.

"Thank you," she tells me, clutching her new phone to her chest.

I nod at her and head toward the bathroom to get ready for bed. There's no way I'm going to get any sleep with this hard-on. I suppose my hand is going to get plenty of action as I count down the days.

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Chapter Twenty-Two

FAYE

"I can't believe you have this already," Chloe says, her eyes flashing with envy as she grabs my phone from the nightstand. "Can I have it?"

Normally, I'd instantly have given in. I don't think I've ever told her no before when I didn't have to, but this time, I want to. I shouldn't really care, but it's the first gift Dion has ever given me.

"I can't give it to you. I'm sorry."

Chloe's brows knit together, and she clenches her jaw. "What?" she says, surprised. "Why not? Dion will just buy you a new one, won't he?"

I hesitate. "I can't just ask him for a new phone, Chloe," I murmur, my tone apologetic.

She grits her teeth and throws me a scornful glare. "Must be nice," she murmurs. "Knowing you'll become a Windsor soon. There's almost nothing you won't have, huh? I'd trade places with you in a heartbeat. At least it'd make the pain worth it."

My eyes widen in surprise at the venom in her voice. It kills me to watch more and more of her spirit fade away each time Father hurts her. My sweet little sister is becoming jaded and bitter as time passes, and there's nothing I can do to prevent it. I can't protect her. All I can do is pray that Abigail is right, and things will get better once Father has the money he was promised.

I glance back at my phone, regret settling in my chest. I should just give it to her and buy myself a cheap one. It's the least I can do. Dion would never notice, and if he does, he likely won't care.

My phone buzzes in Chloe's hand, and her expression sours further. I glance over, the color draining from my face when I see the name on my screen.

Husband.

Heat rushes through me, and I grab the phone out of her hands. Chloe stares at me in shock, her expression one I've never seen before. It's more than the mild material envy I've gotten used to.

"Hello?" I answer carefully, hesitantly. It could only be Dion, but a small part of me is still scared it might be someone else, that this is some kind of weird joke.

"Faye," Dion says, and my heart skips a beat. The way he says my name has always been different, possessive somehow. "You're not asleep yet, are you?"

I sit down on my bed and glance at Chloe, who is staring at me with an expression I can't quite read. "No," I murmur. "I'm still awake. I was just about to go to bed, though."

Chloe looks away and walks out of my room, the door slamming closed behind her. I wince, my own mood plummeting. I've never felt so helpless. Father's increased aggression toward her combined with the loss of Linda's presence is eating at her. No matter how hard I try, I can't protect her — not fully.

"I wanted to see your expression, you know?"

I frown as I get into bed, pulling the covers over me. "What do you mean?" I ask, my voice soft.

"I've been daydreaming about it… the way you'd look when you saw an incoming call from me, *Husband* flashing across your screen."

Heat rushes to my cheeks, and I clear my throat awkwardly, my thoughts clearing. "My sister was holding my phone when you called," I tell him. "I don't think I've ever yanked something out of her hand so quickly. She probably thinks I'm some sort of weird cliché person now."

Dion chuckles, and the sound makes my heart race. I haven't spoken to him since our trip a few weeks ago, but things definitely aren't the way they used to be. The distance between us has decreased, and the thought of marrying him no longer torments me. I'm not even sure when that changed,

but somewhere along the line, I stopped dreading my wedding day. I'm not exactly looking forward to it either, but I'm no longer scared he'll hurt me the way my father does.

Even when he's furious, he doesn't make me feel unsafe. There have been times that his words were rough, but his touch never has been. If Dion was going to hurt me, he'd have done it when he caught me speaking to Eric. It's odd, but somehow, I'm a little grateful it happened at all. I'd never be able to explain it to Dion, but witnessing him getting that angry and still not raise his hand was strangely reassuring.

"Is she still there?" he asks.

"No. I'm in bed now." Dion groans, and I bite down on my lip. "I… I mean…"

"Forty-eight days," he murmurs. "Do you have any idea how hard it was to share a bed with you, knowing I couldn't touch you?"

I smile as my eyes fall closed. "You really are counting down? I thought you didn't want to marry me, either."

Dion falls silent for a moment. "I didn't," he admits. "But I'm glad it's you, Faye."

I tighten my grip on the phone, my heart racing. Dion treated me coldly for years, as though he couldn't care less about me, like I was a major inconvenience he didn't want in his life. I was always scared of what would happen if he had to tolerate me in his space continuously. He seemed to hate being around me, and I assumed he was just hiding his cruelty, the way my father does in public. I've never been more grateful to be proven wrong about someone.

"I'm actually calling to let you know that I'll be away for a couple of weeks. I need to finalize my company's move. I should be back two weeks before the wedding."

"Thank you," I murmur. "I really like hearing that from you personally." For years, I kept track of where he was or what he was up to through the gossip magazines. The Herald, in particular, loves reporting on the movements of the Windsors. Whenever Dion was pictured with another woman, my father would become angrier than usual, and I liked having a heads up of sorts. I always made sure I saw the articles before he did, so I could better shield Linda and Chloe and keep them out of his sight.

"Would it be okay if I ask a question?"

“Of course, Faye. You can ask me anything, anytime. I know I wasn’t always the most attentive, but that’ll change now. You’re entitled to *me*. *All* of me.”

I fall silent, surprised by his answer. “I was just wondering why you’re moving the company, instead of asking me to move to London with you,” I say eventually.

He sighs, pausing for a moment. “It was an agreement with my grandmother,” he admits. “She let me study and work overseas so long as I promised to move back home when I got married. My time is up, so I’m honoring my promise.”

I nod to myself. “I see. Do you think you’ll miss it?” I can’t help but wonder about the life he’s leaving behind. Does he have friends there? My stomach twists as my thoughts turn in a different direction. He promised me fidelity, but that doesn’t mean he isn’t leaving someone behind in London, the way I’m leaving Eric in the past.

“Yeah,” he answers instantly. “I’ll miss it, but we’ll probably have to go back every few months, anyway. I handle all of our foreign assets, so I’m always either in the UK, Australia, or Canada. Every once in a while we’ll travel to Asia, but not as often.”

“I would go with you?” I ask, before remembering his grandmother’s rule. Once we’re married, we aren’t allowed to be apart for more than three consecutive days. If we are, Dion loses his inheritance, and the payments to my father will stop.

“I would hope so,” he says carefully. “I didn’t mean to assume, Faye.”

“No, I’m sorry. I just forgot about the rules for a moment, that’s all.” I hesitate for a moment. “Will you… will you be okay flying?”

Dion falls silent. “Yeah,” he says eventually. “I’ll be okay, sweetheart. It’ll be nice to have you with me, though. Something to look forward to, I suppose.”

I turn in bed, my thoughts drifting to the future. It no longer seems so bleak, so scary. I’m not sure if we’d be able to find happiness together, but knowing there won’t be any pain is such a relief.

“That does mean you’ll have to finish the house yourself, baby.”

My eyes widen as excitement courses through me. “I can? Would that be okay?”

He chuckles, and I grip my phone tightly. “Of course, Faye. I can’t wait to see what you do with our home. When we initially discussed it, we

seemed to be on the same page in terms of decor, so it should be fine. I left a list of all our contractors with my grandmother. They know you'll be contacting them, so don't hesitate to ask for anything you want. There's an interior design company we often use if you prefer it, but you really seemed to like the thought of decorating, so I thought I'd leave it to you."

"Thank you," I rush to say. "For trusting me with this. You have no idea how much this means to me, Dion. I won't let you down, I promise."

He laughs. "You're so fucking adorable," he murmurs. "Forty-eight days… at least I'll be working through most of it, so maybe that'll help pass the time."

Heat rushes to my cheeks, and I squeeze my eyes closed. The thought of sharing a bed with him always terrified me. I was scared he'd use me, that he'd be rough and hurt me, taking only what he needs with no care for my comfort. I assumed it'd be a new kind of punishment, and maybe in some ways it still will be, but I'm no longer scared in the same way I used to be.

"I have to go. I'll try to call you every once in a while, alright? If you need anything at all, just text me. The time difference is a little inconvenient, but I'll make it work."

"Okay," I murmur. "Have a safe flight, Dion." For a moment, I consider asking him to text me once he's safely landed, but then I think better of it. Part of me is still scared to inconvenience him. Drawing any attention to myself or asking for anything has always resulted in pain in the long run, and I don't really want to risk it.

Dion seems to hesitate for a moment, but then he sighs. "Night, Faye. I'll see you soon."

He ends the call, and I stare at my phone, my heart heavy. I didn't want to stop talking to him, and I'm not sure what to make of that.

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Chapter Twenty-Three

FAYE

Dion's house is quiet as I walk from room to room, admiring the final result. There's something so special about having decorated it myself. I never knew a house could feel like this — so warm.

Every time I set foot in here, I feel at peace. I know that technically, it's just four walls, and they hold no mystical powers. Yet somehow, I feel safe here. It feels like my father can't reach me, like the weight of my responsibilities is lessened. I've been using this house as an escape, telling him it was important I finish decorating before Dion gets back, and the reprieve it's granted me has been invaluable.

The interior design in this home is a culmination of all my choices, and just being here brings me joy. In my father's house, I wasn't even allowed to pick the color of my desk chair, but I handpicked every last detail here, right down to the doorknobs. I spent weeks ensuring everything was perfect, and I felt like I was truly in my element.

I didn't think anything else could bring me the peace playing the piano gives me, but I truly lost myself in design details. Maybe it was simply the aspect of being able to control my new living environment, and the hope that inspired, but it felt like *more*.

I pause in the living room, my gaze settling on the grand piano by the window. Grandma Anne had it delivered last week, and the state it had been in was painful to witness. She told me it's Dion's most prized possession,

but it was so badly out of tune it was barely playable. I had it tuned and restored as best as I could, and it's quickly become my favorite part of the house. I wonder why Dion let it deteriorate to that extent?

I can only assume it's because he wasn't around much, but somehow, I find that hard to believe. This piano probably cost more than my father's house, and it was clearly custom made.

I sit down and lightly trace the tip of my fingers over the keys of the gorgeous and priceless Steinway, a rush of excitement thrumming through my veins as I begin to play Liszt's *La Campanella.* A piano like this one was made to be played.

I smile as the melody fills the living room, the acoustics as good as they can be in a home. It took years of practice to be able to play this piece at all, and it's since become my favorite. When life felt too hard and the weight of my family's expectations became too heavy, I'd lose myself in piano pieces like this one. Playing *La Campanella* requires a certain amount of control, and being able to do it has always made me feel powerful. I sigh as I play the last note, my eyes falling closed. I wish I could feel this way every second of every day.

"Beautiful."

I tense at the sound of Dion's voice, my spine going rigid. I didn't realize he'd be back so soon, and I certainly hadn't expected to find him here tonight.

I inhale sharply and lift my gaze to find him leaning back against the wall behind me. "I… I'm sorry," I murmur, frozen in place. I should get up and apologize properly, but somehow, I can't do anything but stare at him. Once again, he's dressed impeccably, and the light stubble on his face only enhances his sharp jaw. "I… I didn't mean to touch your piano. I just… I… It's just so stunning, and I couldn't resist her," I admit, my heart pounding wildly.

His gaze roams over me, but I can't read that intense look in his eyes. He looks both haunted and mesmerized at once. This is exactly how he looked at me when he attended my concert, and he's got me enraptured. No one has ever looked at me what way before — not even Eric.

"I know the feeling," he whispers, almost as though he didn't want me to hear but simultaneously couldn't keep the words buried.

"Everything that's mine is yours, Faye," he murmurs, his voice louder this time. "Everything."

He pushes off the wall and walks toward me, his steps slow, leisurely. He doesn't stop until he's right beside the piano bench I'm seated on, his eyes never leaving mine as he kneels down. "Play it again," he murmurs, his hand wrapping around my waist. "For me, this time." He inhales shakily and buries his face against my neck, stealing my breath. "Please, Faye." His voice is a whispered plea — one I cannot deny.

My fingers tremble as I begin to play the piece again, and I miss a few notes. I expected him to reprimand me, or demand that I start over like my father always does, but instead, he softly kisses my neck, his grip tightening on my waist for a moment before his palm slowly slides down my stomach. His breath hitches, and he nips at my neck before sliding his hand further down, until he reaches the hem of my skirt.

His fingers slip underneath, and I tense, missing several notes as his hand slides up to my thigh. I squirm under his hold, confused by the way he's making me feel. It's just like when he kissed me in Hawaii. My body is heated, needy, and a soft whimper escapes my lips when he slips his fingers between my thighs, his thumb brushing against my lace underwear.

He keeps his hand there, and it takes all of me not to squirm in my seat in an attempt to bring him closer, to make his thumb brush against me just a little more.

"Sixteen days," he murmurs, seemingly unbothered by how unrecognizable *La Campanella* has become. I've missed so many notes that I'm no longer sure what I'm playing, and for the first time in my life, I can't bring myself to care. "Soon, I'm going to make you play the hardest piece you know, while I kneel between your pretty legs and taste your pussy."

I hardly recognize the needy sound that escapes from deep in my throat, and Dion chuckles, his breath tickling my ear.

"Soon, you'll think of me every time you play, and each time I hear the sound of a piano, I'll think of you. My beautiful, delicious *wife*."

My fingers still, and the room falls silent. Dion pulls away a little to look at me, his free hand gently cupping my cheek. He turns me to face him, and the desire in his eyes steals my breath. He looks at me like I'm the only thing he can see, like everything else fades away when he's holding me like this.

His gaze drops to my lips, and he sighs. "I've thought of you every single day while I was away. When I close my eyes, I can just about

imagine the way you taste… but I need a reminder, Faye. Won't you remind me?"

Dion leans in just a touch, until his lips brush against mine, his touch hesitant, as though he wants to give me a chance to pull away. When I don't, he groans and captures my lips, his movements soft but urgent.

I moan when his tongue brushes over my lips and open up for him instinctively. Dion's hand wraps through my hair, and he grips tightly as he tangles his tongue with mine, tasting, devouring. I reach for him, my arms wrapping around his neck, and he pulls me closer, his touch as desperate as mine.

He captures my bottom lip between his teeth for a moment before letting go, his forehead dropping to mine, both of us panting. "Faye," he moans. "I thought I'd be able to resist you if I saw you again, but I should've known better."

He leans in and presses a soft lingering kiss to my cheek, partially on the edge of my mouth, and it takes all of me not to turn toward him and kiss him all over again. Every step of the way, he surprises me, and in turn, I end up surprising myself.

Dion kisses my forehead, and then he pulls away with a sweet, intimate smile. Something about that look in his eyes makes me smile back at him, and a moment that should've felt awkward instead feels natural.

He sighs as he rises to his feet, making no effort to hide his desire from me. I instinctively press my thighs together when his movements place his hard length at eye level, and Dion reaches for me. He smirks as he places his index finger underneath my chin and lifts my head until my eyes meet his.

"And just like that, you've created a new fantasy, baby. You, seated right here," he murmurs, his voice hoarse. His finger traces up my chin to my lips. "And that pretty mouth of yours wrapped around my cock."

The image he paints drifts through my mind, and though it should repulse me to be used that way, it oddly excites me. A small part of me is curious what Dion would look like losing control because of something I'm doing to him.

"But for now," he whispers. "I want you to show me around our new home." He takes a step away and looks around the living room. "I love what I'm seeing so far."

He walks to our large white sectional sofa, a faint smile on his lips. I watch him as he takes off his suit jacket and waistcoat, a soft sigh escaping him as he slowly undoes his cufflinks and drops them on top of his jacket.

“We don’t have to do it now,” I tell him. “You must be so tired. I didn’t mean to intrude. It’s quite late already, and you probably want to go to bed.”

He shakes his head as rolls up his sleeves, exposing his forearms. I bite down on my lip as an unfamiliar sensation rushes through me. “What I want,” he says, his eyes trailing over my body. He smiles roguishly and shakes his head. “Is for you to show me around.”

I move to walk past him, but he grabs my hand, startling me. Dion looks into my eyes as he entwines our fingers, his gaze heated. “Let’s go,” he says, smirking.

I bite back a nervous smile and pull him along, trying my hardest not to notice how large his hands are, and how much rougher and stronger they are than mine. Yet somehow, that’s all I can think about as we move from room to room.

“You did so well, angel,” he tells me as we step into his new home office. I decorated it in dark wooden tones, and it’s probably one of my favorite rooms. “I love everything you’ve done. I knew you’d turn this space into a real home.”

I look up at him, surprised by his words. No one has ever complimented me like that before. I’m tempted to ask him if he means it, but I’m too scared he’ll think I’m fishing for compliments, and the last thing I want to do is annoy him.

I look down at the floor as I lead him into the last room, our bedroom. For some reason, the idea of being here with him makes me nervous, and not in the way it used to.

Dion chuckles and raises our joined hands to his lips. He kisses the back of my hand and looks into my eyes, making my heart race. “This is my favorite room so far,” he murmurs.

“I’m glad you like it,” I whisper, relieved. “I went with dark tones and a modern aesthetic.”

He turns toward me, and I involuntarily take a step back, but that doesn’t deter him. My back hits the wall, and he smiles as my cheeks heat. Is he also reminded of the way he had me pressed up against the wall in Hawaii?

“Start moving your things in,” he tells me. “Sixteen days, Faye. That’s all the time you have left. From the moment we’re married, I’m not spending a single night alone in that bed.”

I nod, my heart racing. I’m relieved that he seems to want me, at least, but what happens when he realizes I have no experience in bed? What happens when he finds out I don’t know how to please him? How long until he gets bored with me, and his desire turns to frustration? What happens then?

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Chapter Twenty-Four

Faye

I keep perfectly still as my makeup artist touches up my lipstick one last time. The woman looking back at me in the mirror definitely looks like a bride, but I'm not sure I feel like one. Perhaps it's simply because the nerves I expected to feel are notably absent, or maybe it's the incessant chatter surrounding me.

I'm not sure what a wedding day is supposed to feel like, but I didn't think I'd feel this lonely, even though Abigail, Linda, and Chloe are in the seats next to me, getting ready.

They haven't stopped talking about Linda's sorority and Chloe's grades, but each time I tried to join the conversation, they seemed to dismiss me. I'd ask a question, and the conversation would stall, as though they were merely humoring me with their answers before turning back to each other. In the end, I decided to let them catch up without intruding. I know they don't do it on purpose, but every once in a while, they really make me feel like an outsider. On days like today, that hurts more than usual.

"All done," my makeup artist says, and I smile at her in gratitude. For a moment, I wonder what Dion will think once he sees me. I've never felt quite this beautiful, and I can't help but imagine the way his eyes will darken, like they do right before he kisses me. To say I'm nervous about tonight would be putting it mildly, but I'm not scared he'll treat me cruelly.

Maybe I truly am trading one gilded cage for another, but between my father and Dion, I'd much rather have Dion.

I'm startled out of my thoughts when a soft knock sounds on the door, and I tense when it swings open before I give permission to enter. My eyes widen in surprise when Sierra and Raven walk in together, followed by two bodyguards in black suits.

"Faye," Raven says, a polite smile on her face. "I'm really sorry to do this to you on such an important day, but there was a major issue with your wedding dress, so I've had to bring you a different one."

Linda jumps out of her seat, her face contorting in outrage. "That is *completely* unacceptable. Do you have any idea who my sister is marr—" she begins to say, her words trailing off once she realizes who she's talking to.

Raven cocks her brow and pins her down with a stare. "I don't think we've met," she says, her voice dripping with disdain. "I'm Raven Windsor."

I've always found Raven intimidating, but the version of her standing in front of me right now is one that's simply terrifying. Sierra stares at Linda in much the same way, catching me by surprise. Though I don't know either of them all that well, they were incredibly kind to me in Hawaii. The change in behavior is jarring, and it takes all of me not to cower.

"Sierra Windsor," Sierra says, her tone curt. "And as far as I'm aware, this room was reserved solely for Faye. I'm going to have to insist that you give us a moment with her. The Windsor security team will show you to a different room."

Raven glances back at the two bodyguards behind her and nods. "Sierra really does hate repeating herself," she says. "So I won't make her."

The men move toward Abigail, Linda, and Chloe, and apprehension runs down my spine. Surely Sierra and Raven won't actually throw out my family? "Would it be okay if they stay?" I rush to say, my voice trembling.

Abigail throws me a panicked look when one of the bodyguards wraps a hand around her arm, and I respond in kind, uncertain what to do. "There's plenty of space, and I'd hate getting ready all alone. *Please*," I beg, shaking. My words go unheard, and I stare in shock as the room is vacated.

"We'll guard the door," one of the bodyguards says before walking out and closing the door behind him with a finality that makes me weak in the knees.

“Whew,” Sierra says, plopping into Abigail’s makeup chair. She spins it around and smirks. “I didn’t think they’d leave so easily.”

Her stern expression is gone now, and she smiles at me the way she always has, with kindness and affection. Raven throws Sierra a look that’s clearly meant to be a warning, but that same sweet smile that I’d gotten used to is back, and her eyes twinkle when she looks at me. “I’m sorry about that, but privacy is very important to us. You’ll come to appreciate it soon.” Her tone is kind and understanding, but firm. “So about your dress,” she says, before unzipping the garment bag she’s holding.

A soft gasp escapes my lips as she slowly uncovers my dream dress, disbelief rendering me speechless. Raven chuckles as she takes in my reaction, a knowing look in her eyes. How could she have known? I’ve never even asked to try it on.

“There was a problem with the dress you were meant to wear, so I altered this dress for you instead. I hope that’s okay?”

“Yes,” I say instantly, my eyes flickering to hers. Does she realize how happy this makes me? It feels like a good omen, and it gives me a small amount of hope to hold on to. “It’s an honor to be wearing any of your gowns at all.”

Sierra jumps to her feet, her expression surprisingly vulnerable. “If it’s okay with you, we’d love to help you get dressed,” she murmurs, before shooting me a sweet but somewhat hesitant smile. “I wanted to reach out after Hawaii since we didn’t really get to spend much time together then, but Dion told us to stay away from you until the wedding. For some strange reason, he was convinced we’d scare you away.” She throws Raven an incredulous stare. “Us!” she adds. “As if we aren’t total delights!”

I bite back my laughter, my mood lifting instantly. There’s something about Sierra that makes me feel so at ease. She was very sweet to me in Hawaii too, but Dion and I weren’t in a good place then, and I’d avoided her as much as I could because of it. I regret it now, and I hope it’s not too late to reciprocate her attempts to reach out.

Sierra grins at me and reaches for her bag. “Which reminds me, Dion asked me to give this to you.”

She hands me an envelope, and I stare at it for a moment, a sudden bout of nerves rushing over me. My fingers tremble as I pull out a handwritten note, my eyes widening.

Faye,

Today is the day I stop counting down. Instead, I'll start counting my blessings, because that's what I hope each day with you will be. I know this isn't what either of us wanted, but from now on, we're in this together. From now on, I'm truly yours. For better or worse.

- D. W.

I reread it over and over, my heart racing. *Yours*. He isn't saying that I belong to him now, like I'm a piece of property he's acquiring. He's telling me *he* is *mine* now, and it hits me hard. I wonder if some part of him knew that this is what I needed to hear today.

I look up to find Sierra and Raven exchanging looks with each other, both of them grinning. My cheeks instantly heat, and I lower my gaze. Did they read this card before giving it to me? I'm used to anything that's addressed to me being read by my father, but somehow, I want to keep this one little card to myself. Just this once.

"Ready?" Raven asks, her tone patient, kind, as though she'll genuinely wait as long as I need her to. Tears gather in my eyes, a sudden bout of uncontrollable emotions rendering me speechless. All morning, this has felt like another event I had to attend, another role to play — but right now, with Sierra and Raven standing here with me, I suddenly feel like a *bride*.

The nervous jitters, the way my thoughts keep turning back to Dion's words, and the smiles on their faces… I'm not sure what it is about this moment, but I feel special in a way I never have before. I feel more comfortable with these two women that I don't know all that well than I did with my stepmom and sisters.

"Yes," I answer. "I'm ready."

Raven nods and holds up my wedding dress, and I wonder if she realizes how surreal this is for me. She's one of the world's most famous models and designers, and here she is, personally helping me get dressed. I know that she'll soon be my sister-in-law, but I didn't expect her to treat me so kindly. She scared me for a few moments earlier, but most of the time, she's nothing like I thought she'd be. I wonder if it's a Windsor trait.

"You look beautiful, Faye," she says as she stands behind me in front of the mirror, working on the buttons on my back. "This dress truly was made for you."

Raven steps back and wraps her hand around Sierra's shoulder, her eyes roaming over me in satisfaction. "You might be marrying Dion today, Faye, but you're gaining an entire new family, too. Being a Windsor can be overwhelming at times, but you'll never be alone. Not ever again."

My throat closes up, and I draw a shaky breath. I know it's just a nice thing to say, but her words hit me hard. She has no idea how *alone* I've always felt, even though I never was.

Another knock sounds on the door, and my father walks in wearing the gentlest smile I've ever seen. I'm so relieved not to find any anger in his eyes that I almost genuinely smile at him. I can't remember the last time I did that.

"That's our cue," Sierra tells me, throwing me a kind look before walking away. Raven follows Sierra out, and my father's smile melts away the second the door closes behind her.

"That dress is a disgrace," he snaps. "It's far too simple for a Windsor bride. You're not even married yet and they're already mocking you. There's no way someone like Raven Windsor messed up your dress days before the wedding, when there was nothing wrong at your last fitting. They're trying to embarrass us, and we can't do anything about it but take it with a smile."

"I… I don't think —"

He reaches for me and grabs my arm tightly. Fear rushes through me, and I fall silent. "Don't think you'll get to rest easy from now on, and don't think for a moment those two have your best interests at heart. You need to work hard to win Dion over. Without his support, they'll trample all over us. You should have kicked up a fuss when they asked Abigail and the girls to leave. What is wrong with you, you spineless piece of shit? How could you have stood there and watch your family be embarrassed like that?" He

pulls me forward, and I nearly stumble in my heels. “Try to get through the wedding without embarrassing me any further, or so help me god, I’ll make Chloe and Linda pay for your mistakes.”

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Chapter Twenty-Five

Dion

Faye barely even looked me in the eye throughout our entire ceremony. Even as she walked down the aisle, she kept her gaze downcast, as though the only way she could get through our vows was by dissociating. I thought things between us had been as good as they can be considering the circumstances, but perhaps I was the only one who'd felt that way.

Even kissing her once we were pronounced husband and wife felt wrong — if that brief, brush of my lips against hers can even be counted as a kiss. I wish she'd leaned into me the way she did two weeks ago, in our home. I wish she'd kissed me back, so at least one part of our wedding ceremony had felt real.

"You okay?" I murmur as we move through the room, networking as is expected of us. The venue is filled with politicians eager for our donations, business partners that work with Windsor Enterprises' subsidiaries, and countless acquaintances that want a chance to cozy up to us or others that are in attendance today. It's sickening.

"I'm fine," Faye says, finally looking up at me. She's wearing that same closed-off expression I've always hated, a polite smile on her face. My wife is looking at me like I'm a stranger, like I could be anyone. I should applaud her for her poise and sophistication, but instead, I find myself wanting to provoke her. I want her to burn for me.

My hand wraps around her waist, and I pull her into me, my movements rougher than I'd intended. Faye gasps as I bend toward her as best as I can — even with the high heels she's wearing, her ear is still quite a bit out of reach for me. "I meant it. The note." My voice is soft, calm, reassuring.

She looks into my eyes, and her expression finally cracks, one single ray of hope shining through. It isn't enough for me.

"Zero days," I murmur, and she stares at me, captivated. I watch as her pretty little lips part, and my cock instantly stirs. "You look fucking stunning today, Faye. You have me fucking spellbound, do you know that?"

Her cheeks flush so fucking beautifully, and it thrills me like nothing else ever has. She has no idea what she does to me.

"Faye."

Her entire body tenses, and just like that, that porcelain mask I hate so fervently is back in place, all of my efforts undone. Faye steps out of my embrace and straightens her spine, a polite smile on her face when she turns to our unwelcome intruder.

"Eric," she says, her voice soft. I study her carefully, my heart racing as I try to determine how she feels. If I'm not mistaken, today is the first time she's seen him since they broke up, and though there's a glimmer of pain in her eyes, she keeps her expression perfectly relaxed.

"Why are you here?" I ask. "Your father was invited. *You* were not."

Eric looks up at me, his gaze filled with the same pain I just glimpsed in Faye's. It fucking guts me — makes me feel like an outsider on my own wedding day.

"I'm here on my father's behalf. He couldn't make it." He looks down then, inhaling deeply, before he lifts his head and nods at Faye. "Besides, I had to see this for myself."

"Eric," my wife whispers, her voice filled with longing. It tears at me, taunts me. "I'm sorry."

He shakes his head and smiles at her with such love that I find myself tensing, my entire body reacting violently. "Don't be, my little fairy."

Fairy? I fucking hate that he's got his own nickname for her, but even more so, I hate how much I'd have loved to call her that if he hadn't tainted it. Fairy — it's what her name means, it's what she embodies. I hate how well it suits her.

"She's my *wife*," I snap, my arm snaking around her waist. "You'll call her *Mrs. Windsor*."

“For now,” he tells me, his helplessness making way for defiance. “She’s your wife *for now*.”

I pull Faye closer, my grip tight. “What the fuck is that supposed to mean, Eric? You know better than to covet what’s *mine*. I’ve been as courteous as I can be given the circumstances, but that ends now. Do not mistake my kindness for weakness — you can’t bear the consequences.”

His confidence wavers, and his eyes flick toward Faye before settling back on me. “My father’s firm has represented the Windsor family for years,” he reminds me, his voice soft. “I’ve seen the marriage contract.” He looks at Faye then, his gaze pleading. “Three years,” he murmurs. “I can wait, Faye. For you, I’ll wait.”

Dread washes over me as I take in the shock and realization in her eyes, the *hope*. Had it even occurred to her that she only needs to be tied to me for three years? That she could leave me after that, and there’s nothing I could do to stop her?

The worst part? I can see Eric doing it. I can see him waiting for the day she’s no longer legally obligated to remain married to me. Just like I’d been counting down the days until our wedding, she’ll be counting down the days until it ends.

Pure unadulterated fury seizes me, and I tighten my grip on my wife. “Do you really think she’ll want you after she’s had me?” I ask, my tone sharp. “By the end of the night, she won’t even remember her own name, let alone yours.” I turn to Faye then, a rush of possessiveness washing over me. The feeling is so strong that everything fades but her. “Isn’t that right, wife?”

She looks into my eyes, her gaze pleading for me to stop. “Dion,” she whispers. No. I can’t stand the thought of her asking for mercy on his behalf. “Plea—” I lean in and capture her lips with mine, cutting her off. My tongue brushing over her lips, forcing her to open up for me. She complies, a soft whimper escaping from the back of her throat as I pull her against me until her body is flush with mine. I devour her, lost in my need to claim her. I’ve always been known for my infallible control, yet here I stand, shaken to the core by my wife.

She’s panting by the time I pull away, and I drop my forehead to hers. My perfect, *perfect* wife doesn’t look away, and she has no fucking idea how much that pleases me. She can be so good when she wants to be.

“Dion,” she whispers, her voice soft, defeated. An emotion I can’t quite identify washes over me, and I bend down to lift her into my arms, catching her by surprise.

“I meant it,” I murmur as I carry her out of the venue, hours before I was meant to. “I’ll make you forget all about him, Faye. I’ll be damned if I let my wife pine after another.”

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Chapter Twenty-Six

DION

Faye trembles in my arms as I carry her over the threshold of our home and straight into our bedroom. “I warned you,” I murmur. “I told you that you had until today to get over him, so why the fuck did I still find you looking at him like you wish I were him?”

I place her on the edge of our bed and kneel in front of her. Her wedding dress drapes around her fucking beautifully, and tearing my eyes off her is near impossible. “What did I tell you in Hawaii?” I ask as I grab her ankle. I wanted to take off her shoes, but these silvery sparkly heels look fucking hot on her, and all of a sudden I need to know how she’ll look wearing nothing but those.

“You… you told me you’d f-fuck every memory of him out of me, until you’re all I can think about.”

I lift her leg and watch her silky wedding dress slide up as I expose her skin, bringing her ankle to my lips. I kiss her softly, and she gasps. “What else did I tell you?”

“T-That you’d make me scream your name, over and over again…”

I place soft kisses all the way up to her thigh, and she gasps as I spread her legs, exposing more of her. I suppress a groan when I see the blue lace panties she’s wearing, all for me. “And then?” I ask as I lift her leg over my shoulder. She loses her balance and reaches behind her, bracing herself on our bed. “What did I tell you I’d make you do next?”

I look up into her eyes, my lips pressed against her inner thigh, mere inches from her pussy. She's breathing hard, her fingers curling around our white sheets. "You said you'd make me beg for more."

I smirk as I lean in further, pressing a soft kiss on the apex of her thigh, right at the edge of her underwear. "Yellow," I whisper. "Tell me *yellow* when I do something you don't like, and say *red* if you want me to stop entirely." I glance up at her, my expression serious. "I meant it when I said I wouldn't take you against your will, Faye. Say it, and I'll step away right now. I'll take my anger out on my cock in the shower, and I'll leave you be. I won't touch a single strand of your hair. Do you understand?"

She nods hesitantly, her expression conflicted, as though she isn't sure what to make of me. I lean in a little further, my lips brushing against her covered pussy, and she tilts her hips up slightly, pushing into me. I suppress a grin as I softly kiss the fabric, desperate for a taste of her. "I need to hear you say that you understand, Faye. I need to know that you're aware you can withdraw your consent at any point."

I look into her eyes, and the cautious trust I see in them takes my fucking breath away. "I understand," she whispers.

I watch her for a moment, taking in the way her chest rises and falls, the neckline of her wedding dress showcasing her breasts fucking perfectly. *Stunning*. "Then tell me, my darling wife. What was the last thing I told you that day on the beach?"

She bites down on her lip for a moment, and my cock twitches. I need her so desperately, I can barely think straight. I lean in and let my eyes fall closed in delight as I drag my nose over her pussy.

"You said you'd fuck me so good I'd never want anyone else."

I lower her leg back to the floor and reach for her, my hand wrapping around the back of her neck. "Do you remember the last time I had you in this position?" It was at The Lacara, and I'd spread her legs just the way I have tonight. "You have no idea what I'd wanted to do to you then, but you're about to find out."

I cup her face gently, despite the urgency I feel. My need to make her mine is almost insatiable, and I already know one night with her won't be nearly enough. My thumb brushes over her lips, and her breath hitches.

"Mine," I whisper as I lean in. My lips brush over hers once, twice, before I capture that sweet little mouth of hers fully. I groan when she instantly kisses me back, a thrill running down my spine. I doubt I'll ever

tire of kissing Faye — it's an all-consuming experience, the way her body melts into mine, the way those little pants and moans of hers sound, and fuck, best of all, the way she so eagerly kisses me back.

I'm near fucking delirious as I drop my forehead to hers, my cock throbbing from one single kiss. "I once said I'd never punish you for having a past, but as it turns out, I'm far more petty than I thought. I can't let it go, Faye. I fucking can't."

Her entire body tenses, and I pull away a little to find her staring at me wide-eyed, her faith in me wavering. "I'll punish you once with my fingers for what you did at The Lacara," I murmur, and a surprised gasp escapes her lips as lust flickers through her eyes. "Once with my mouth for what you said to him on the beach, and once with my cock for the way you just looked at him. Pick your order. What do you want first?"

Her lips part in shock and what a fucking sight it is. Having her here on my bed in that beautiful white wedding dress and that fucking look in her eyes. Surreal. It's like she walked right out of my wildest fantasies.

"Choose," I demand.

She hesitates, and just as I'm certain I'll have to make the choice for her, she parts her pretty lips. "F-Fingers," she whispers, looking away.

I smirk at my wife. "You have no idea how fucking enchanted I am," I whisper. "How beautiful you are."

I lean in and kiss her all over again, enjoying the way she moans into my mouth when I drag a finger over her pussy. I nip at her lips, rolling that full bottom lip between my teeth as I push the fabric aside.

I tear my mouth from hers when I find her already wet for me, my breathing ragged. "I need to see," I whisper. "I need to burn the first time you come for me into my mind. Each moan, each expression, each movement. All of it, Faye."

My hands wrap around the sides of her panties, and I slowly drag them down. She places both her hands on my shoulders and lifts her hips for me, and fuck if it isn't the sexiest thing. My heart is pounding wildly as the light blue fabric moves down her thighs, exposing her perfectly smooth pussy.

I look into her eyes as my fingers trail back up, and a soft whimper escapes her lips when my fingers lightly brush over her bare pussy for the very first time. Her hands tighten on my shoulders, and her breathing rapidly turns into panting.

I'm mesmerized as I drag my middle finger through her wet folds. "You're so perfect," I whisper as I circle her clit. It's already perfectly pouty for me, wanting my attention. I watch my wife carefully as I fall into a rhythm she seems to like.

"Dion," she whispers, her tone conveying her desire.

I pause, my cock jerking. "Again," I demand. "Say my name again."

"*Dion*," she breathes, and I push a finger into her.

"Fuck, you're so fucking tight, baby." There's no way she can take my cock like that, but then again, I have all the time in the world. I'll loosen her up slowly until she's ready for me.

I add another finger, and she squirms a little, as though it's too much. "You're doing so good, angel," I murmur as I twist my fingers inside her and press against her G-spot. My fingers pump inside her like that, slowly teasing her, and the way her pussy sucks them in is fucking unreal.

She moans for me, and I smirk as my free hand joins in, my thumb drawing circles around her clit. This is better than every fantasy I've ever had of her. Fuck, this is so much better.

Faye's hands move into my hair, her nails scraping over my scalp as though she doesn't know what to do with them, and I smile as I increase the pace, wanting to see her lose control. There's nothing I want more than to watch my perfect wife unravel.

I study her carefully as she begins to ride my hand, her movements becoming frantic, every hint of embarrassment making way for unadulterated lust. Each time I think she can't get more beautiful, she goes and proves me wrong.

"I can't," she moans, her voice breaking. "It's too much, Dion. *Please*."

I increase the pace further, my touch becoming rough on her clit. "You can," I promise her. "You can and *will* come for me, my love."

She looks into my eyes with equal parts fear and trust, as though the feelings I elicited in her terrify her, yet she trusts me to carry her through. "Come for me, baby," I whisper, swiping across her clit hard. "Give in."

And she does. Her lips part as a moan tears through her throat, her eyes falling closed in delight. Her pussy clamps down on my fingers, becoming impossibly tight, and I watch her in fucking awe as pleasure overtakes her.

I thought I was addicted to her before, but once again, I was wrong. Nothing will ever beat this rush. I swear I could come just from the sight of her.

She opens her eyes, and I see the exact moment she realizes what just happened. A hint of shame flickers through her eyes, but I'm not having any of it. "That was one," I murmur, leaning in to kiss her thigh. "You owe me two more."

I keep my fingers buried inside her as I lap at her sensitive pussy, finally getting a taste of her. As expected — she's fucking delicious.

"Oh God," she moans. "I can't take it. I can't, Dion. I really can't. Please… please stop. I need… I need a break."

I slowly drag my tongue over her clit, my eyes flicking up to hers. She looks as delirious as I feel, and it's a fucking sight to behold. "What you need to do," I whisper against her pussy. "Is give me one more."

Her clit is so swollen and sensitive that even my tongue is too much for her, but I can tell she's close. "Yellow or red, baby," I remind her. "Is this one of them? Think carefully before you answer."

Her grip on my hair tightens, and then she shakes her head. Intense fucking pleasure rushes through me, and I smile at her as I lift her legs over my shoulders. She falls back onto our bed, and I can't help but chuckle. "You'll give me one more, won't you?"

"Answer me," I demand, as I raise her hips into the air. "Tell me you'll be good for me." I hold her like that, my hands on her hips and her thighs on my shoulders. The vision she's presenting me with is so fucking unreal, and I sigh in utter fucking delight as I leisurely kiss the inside of her thigh, waiting for my answer.

"Yes," she moans. "*Yes*. I'll be good, Dion. I swear."

"My good girl," I whisper before circling her clit with my tongue, my movements slower now than before. She's more sensitive than I was anticipating, and I don't want to risk overstimulating her. Not yet.

I gently suck on her clit, and she tightens her legs around my neck in an effort to get me closer. My perfect, perfect wife. I give her what she wants, my tongue teasing, lapping, until her breathing turns erratic and soft moans fill our bedroom. "Dion," she pleads, and I give in, sucking on her clit harshly, sending her over the edge.

She comes on my tongue, and fuck if it isn't the sexiest thing I've ever experienced. She loses all strength in her legs, and I gently lower her onto our bed, refusing to take my mouth off her just yet.

"Perfect," I whisper against her skin. "You're perfect, Faye." My wildest dreams don't hold a handle to the reality of her.

I press one last lingering kiss to her pussy before rising to my feet, towering over her as I pull off my bowtie. “That’s two,” I tell her as I undo my waistcoat and let it fall to the floor. She watches me through lowered lashes, her wedding dress bunched around her waist and her long hair spread over our bed. She has no fucking idea how sexy she looks, does she?

Faye’s eyes follow my every move, and I smirk as a soft gasp escapes her lips when my shirt falls open. “You act like this is the first time you’re seeing my abs,” I murmur. “Like you didn’t massage champagne into them just a few months ago.”

My shirt falls away, and I pause with my hand on the waistband of my trousers. “Come here,” I demand, my voice rough. “Make my fantasies come true, Faye. Undress me.”

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Chapter Twenty-Seven

FAYE

My heart is pounding wildly as I sit on Dion's bed, my wedding dress covering most of me. I've never felt so out of control, so satiated. The way he just touched me was entirely unexpected. A small part of me had still been certain that he'd be impatient with me, and that he'd inadvertently hurt me. I couldn't have been more wrong.

Dion holds his hand out for me, and I hesitantly place my palm on top of his. He smirks as he presses our joint hands on top of the bulge in his pants, sending my heart racing. He did this in Hawaii too, and I'd been just as flustered then.

"Go on," he urges. "Take it off."

I look up into his eyes, my body still humming with desire. It's almost like I'm in a daze as I unzip his pants, like a part of me that I didn't even know existed takes over. Dion groans as I expose his black boxer shorts, my face so close to the fabric that leaning in just slightly would have his hardness brushing against my lips.

Would it be possible for me to make him lose control the way he made me lose it? If I take him into my mouth, will it feel as good for him as it did for me?

"Don't stop there," he demands, his voice rough.

I bite down on my lip as I hook my fingers around the waistband of his boxer shorts, a hint of fear running down my spine when his erection

springs free. I'm not totally innocent — I've watched enough porn to know what to expect tonight, yet somehow, I hadn't anticipated this. I'd felt him in Hawaii, but seeing isn't the same as feeling, clearly.

I whimper involuntarily, uncertain how he could possibly fit inside me. For one single moment, I consider telling him I've never done this before, but it feels too late to bring it up now.

Dion chuckles as he takes in my expression, and I look away instantly, embarrassed. He makes me act so unlike myself, and though it's oddly freeing, it's also throwing me off. When he touches me, it's almost like I can't recognize myself. He doesn't know it, but he single-handedly took away the influence the word *punishment* has always had over me.

"Your turn," he murmurs. "You look fucking beautiful in that dress, my love, but I don't want anything between us the first time I fuck you."

I bite down on my lip, embarrassment suddenly washing over me. Keeping part of my body covered made me feel… protected somehow. I've never been naked in front of another person, and I'm not sure I'm ready for something as intimate as that. It seems odd, considering everything we've done so far, but I'm scared he'll look at me and find me lacking. This dress makes me look and feel incredible, and without it, it'll just be… *me*.

"Can we… can we turn off the lights?" I ask, my voice wavering. I look down at the floor, insecurity stealing away the hazy lust Dion created.

"Absolutely not," he whispers, pulling me to my feet. I stumble and crash into him, his bare body pressing against my wedding dress. Dion wraps his arms around me and holds me tightly, his eyes roaming over my face, until I finally gather the courage to look up at him. "I don't want to miss a second of this, baby. I want to enjoy every inch of your body and witness every expression you make. The first time I take you won't be in the dark, Faye. You came for me twice tonight, but now you're getting shy?"

I look away, unable to explain my sudden vulnerability. He's right, of course. Just moments ago, I was moaning his name shamelessly, but something as simple as this has me feeling insecure.

Dion reaches around me and begins to undo the buttons of my dress, his touch as patient as it's been all night. When he carried me out of the ballroom, I'd been worried and anxious, but each of his actions has been in sharp contrast to his harsh words. What he thinks is punishment is exactly what I never knew I needed.

My dress comes undone, and he lets it fall away, exposing my body. “Fucking hell,” he whispers, his gaze glued to my chest. “Is any part of you anything short of perfect?”

I tense and cross my arms over myself despite the way my stomach flutters at his words, unable to help it. Dion’s expression darkens for a moment, but he doesn’t stop me. Instead, he smirks and leans in, lifting me into his arms in one smooth move.

“*Dion*,” I whisper, burying my face against his neck as he walks around our bed, my arms wrapping around his neck. For a moment, I consider clinging to him in an effort to hide, but he eliminates my need for it when he lays me down and covers my body with his.

He pushes my legs apart and settles between them, pressing against my still throbbing heat, his forearms on either side of my head.

“One more,” he murmurs, his eyes on mine. “Can you give me one more, baby?”

There’s something about the way he looks at me that makes me unable and unwilling to hide from him. He looks so captivated, as though I truly am as perfect as he tells me.

“Dion,” I whisper, drawing a shaky breath, my arms tightening around his neck. “I… I’m really scared.”

“Why?” he asks, his voice soft, distracted. His lips drop to my neck, and he kisses me in the same spot as on the plane, drawing a moan from my throat. He chuckles and kisses me again, stealing away all my thoughts, my worries. “Been dreaming of this,” he whispers as he kisses his way down to my collarbone. “I’ve got a lifetime to explore your body, yet I want to memorize every inch of you right now.”

He makes a needy sound at the back of his throat before slowly dragging his tongue over my nipple, circling it until it hardens for him. I squirm underneath him, a wave of fresh desire rushing through me. “Yeah,” he moans. “You like that, don’t you?” He moves to my other breast and does it all over again. “Of course you do. You’re so perfect… my good girl, my *wife*.”

His free hand slides down to my thigh, and he repositions my leg. I move with him instinctively and wrap it over his hip, following his guidance. Dion pulls away a little to look at me, his gaze hazy with desire. “Baby,” he pleads. “I’m not sure how much more I can take.”

He moves back up, and the way his erection glides against me draws another moan from my lips. He does it again and watches me intently, as though I've got him spellbound. "*Dion*." I'm not sure if I meant my tone to be admonishing or pleading, but the way he smiles as he teases me again tells me he takes it to be the latter.

"You like the way my cock slides against your clit, huh? Can you give me one more just like that, Faye? Just one more, angel."

His breathing rapidly turns ragged as he lets the tip slide against me, pushing in just a fraction before pulling away, the repeated sensation maddening. "Yes," I moan, a familiar sensation building inside me once again. I was certain I was at my breaking point, that I couldn't come again, yet I feel myself rapidly losing control. My hands wrap into Dion's hair, and I grip tightly as his movements become more frantic, his own control slipping as he pushes into me a little deeper with each move, stretching me in a painful but satisfying way.

"Please," I moan. "*Yes*."

He smiles at me, looking entirely mesmerized and so incredibly pleased as I shatter for him all over again, my inner muscles tightening almost painfully around the tip of his cock, wave after wave of pleasure washing over me. "That's my girl," he praises. "You're such a good girl, aren't you? So fucking good for me. I knew you could do it."

I smile back at him, my stomach fluttering and my heart skipping a beat. He looks at me like I just accomplished something great, like I made him proud, and it heightens my passion.

He gently kisses my forehead, his touch so tender that it brings a new kind of ache to my heart. I want to keep making him proud like that. I don't want him to lose that look in his eyes.

Dion holds himself up on his forearms, his gaze searching. "I need you," he whispers. "I need to be inside of you, Faye, *fully*."

I nod, and he slowly sinks just a little deeper into me, drawing a pained whimper for my throat. "Too much?" he asks.

I shake my head and tighten my grip on his hair. "Dion, I… I need you, too. I want you. All of you."

He moans, and his eyes glaze over with lust. "*Fuck*," he groans, before pushing into me just a little further.

"It hurts," I whisper, a hint of fear running down my spine. He made me feel so good before, but this… the way he's stretching me hurts.

“You’re so wet, darling,” he murmurs. “You can do this. You can take all of me, Faye. We’ll take it slow.”

I nod, and he locks his jaw, his eyes on mine as he pushes into me further. “You’re doing so good. You feel so fucking perfect, Faye. Can you take a little more?”

I shake my head. “I can’t.” My voice breaks, and I look away. I don’t want to let him down, but I can’t help it.

Dion smiles at me reassuringly and leans in, his lips brushing over mine. “I’ve got all the time in the world, Faye. We can go slow.” He kisses me leisurely and pulls his hips back, slipping nearly all the way out of me before gently pushing back in, his movements shallow and slow.

My nails scrape over his scalp, and he moans into my mouth before pushing in a little deeper than before. “Okay?” he whispers against my lips. I nod, and he smiles. “Such a good girl. You’re taking my cock so well, baby. You’re doing so good.”

My body slowly adjusts, and his movements reignite the fire that burns low in my stomach. I moan softly when he moves a certain way, and he inhales shakily before thrusting into me fully. The way he groans makes a different kind of desire run through my body, despite the searing pain. I never thought I could feel powerful while lying underneath him, but that’s exactly what he does to me. “So good,” he whispers, sounding half delirious. “This is better than the fantasies that sustained me, baby. So much better.”

I smile and gently cup his cheek, showing him the same tenderness he’s been showering me with all night. My touch is hesitant as I brush my lips against his, and he takes over, kissing me slowly, gently.

Dion moans against my lips when I fully wrap my legs around his hips, and he begins to move, slowly at first, his thrusts as gentle as his kisses.

“My wife’s pussy is so perfect,” he whispers against my lips, and something blooms in my chest — something dark and possessive that I can’t quite name. All I know is that this new part of me hums in satisfaction at his words. “You were made for me, Faye.”

He moves back a little to look at me and pulls out almost all the way before slowly pushing back into me, his eyes never leaving mine. He watches me carefully, as though my pleasure is far more important than his, when he’s already given me so much.

“Does it still hurt, baby?”

I shake my head, heat pooling low in my stomach as his movements become a little rougher, his thrusts harder and deeper. “Fuck,” he moans when I lift my hips a little, trying to move with him better. “Yeah, like that,” he groans, taking me faster, rougher. “That’s my girl,” he moans. “Look at you taking my cock, Faye. You’re such a good girl for me, so fucking good, so perfect.”

His movements become more frantic, and I moan as the sensations morph into something delicious. It isn’t quite the same as when he used his fingers or his tongue, but it feels *good*. “Dion,” I moan, and he clenches his jaw.

“Can’t take it when you say my name like that, angel. You make me so fucking weak.”

I bite down on my lip, unable to tear my eyes off him. “I’m going to paint your perfect pussy white, Faye,” he tells me, his movements becoming near-painful as he takes me with fast, hard strokes, his control slipping. There’s something strangely empowering about watching him lose that icy control of his, all because of *me*.

“Fuck, *Faye*,” he moans, my name on his lips as he comes deep inside me, his eyes falling closed as pure delight takes over his expression. His forehead drops to mine, and he collapses on top of me, his weight oddly comforting. “Perfect,” he whispers, his lips finding mine. “You’re fucking perfect.”

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Chapter Twenty-Eight

DION

Faye whimpers as I pull away from her just slightly, only to fall back asleep instantly. I can't help but stare at her, my heart at ease for the first time in years. I've never felt quite so satiated, so fulfilled. Being with her was everything I thought it would be, and more.

Our marriage might not be what we wanted, but perhaps my brothers were onto something after all. When I've got her in my bed, there's no distance between us. With time, I might be able to eradicate any distance outside of our bed too.

I carefully move to the edge of our bed, only to freeze as I lift the covers, the morning light illuminating dark stains on our sheets. Several moments pass before realization dawns, and I stare back at my wife's sleeping form in shock. *Fuck*. How could I not have realized? The pain she so clearly felt was beyond what was normal, considering how many times I'd already made her come. I'm a complete fucking idiot.

I should've stopped straight away, but instead I selfishly continued to fuck her, taking her virginity without even knowing it. I should've slowly stretched her out using my fingers until I was certain she could take me, but instead I made her first experience one filled with pain.

I'm trembling as I slip out of our bed and reach for my discarded boxers, my stomach twisting. I fucked up, and I have no fucking idea how to make it better. I'm in a daze as I walk toward the kitchen, where a fresh

pot of coffee is already waiting for me, courtesy of my grandmother's spies masquerading as housekeepers.

I'm absentminded as I knock back half a cup, unable to think of a way to make it up to her. What the fuck do I do? I should've cleaned her up last night and ensured she wasn't in any pain, but instead I simply turned us over, my cock still buried deep inside her as we both drifted off, my arms wrapped around her. It had felt perfect to me, but for her, it must've been beyond uncomfortable.

"Dion?"

I look up to find Faye standing in the doorway, my shirt enveloping her body. I stare at her in fucking awe, barely able to comprehend that she's my *wife*.

"I'm… I'm sorry… I just… I haven't unpacked, and your shirt—"

"My shirt looks perfect on you," I murmur. "In fact, I think I should give all of them to you. They look far better on you than they ever did on me."

Her eyes widen a fraction, and then she laughs. I stare at her in disbelief, my heart skipping a beat. Fucking stunning.

I walk up to her and gently lift her into my arms, startling her. I carefully carry her into the kitchen and place her on top of the counter, my arms on either side of her. "Forgive me, Faye," I plead, my voice breaking. "I didn't know."

She lowers her gaze, but I still notice the guilt in her eyes. "Are you mad at me?" she asks, her voice wavering.

"Mad?" I repeat, confused. "Why would I be mad, baby? If I'm mad at all, it's only at myself. I never wanted to hurt you, angel. If I'd known, I'd have been more careful."

She wraps her arms around herself and stares at the floor. "Perhaps mad isn't the right word. Are you disappointed, Dion? I know I'm not… I'm nothing like the women you're usually photographed with. I have no… *experience*. The things you did to me… I don't know how to make you feel the same way."

"Faye," I whisper. "Please look at me."

She does as I ask, and my heart drops when I see despair in her beautiful blues. I smile at her and shake my head ruefully. "There's no real way for me to say this in a polite manner, but I have *never* come harder than I did last night, buried deep inside you. That was the single best sexual

experience I've ever had. If that's what you do to me with no experience, I'll be well and truly fucked once we get to know each other's bodies better, hmm?"

I watch as she bites back a budding smile, and I can't help but grin back at her. She isn't someone I even wanted to *like*, yet here I am, slowly becoming increasingly entangled in her web. Every little thing I find out about her becomes another chip in my defenses.

"How do you feel?" I ask, feeling oddly flustered. "Does it… does it still hurt?"

Her eyes widen a fraction, and her cheeks turn rosy. "It's all just a little sensitive," she murmurs, unable to look me in the eye. She's fucking adorable. It's primitive and fucking wrong, but knowing that I'm the only one who's ever had her pussy fills me with such intense delight. Mine. She truly is entirely *mine*.

My satisfaction slowly evaporates as I think back to the first time I saw her with Eric, and my stomach twists painfully as the pieces fall together. "At The Lacara," I murmur, my voice strained. "You'd been planning to give him your virginity?"

Faye's eyes widen, fear and apprehension flashing through them. My heart sinks when I realize what she's leaving unspoken. I took what she'd wanted to give to Eric.

I avert my gaze, unable to look at her right now. "I see," I murmur, more to myself than to her.

"Dion," she whimpers, her voice breaking. "I…"

I turn my back to her and take a deep, steadying breath. Of course she wouldn't have wanted to share something as special as that with me. I run a hand through my hair, sick to my stomach. I've taken so much from her already, but this is something that should've been hers to *give*. If she'd had a choice, she never would've chosen me.

She and I both know it.

"I don't regret it," she whispers. "I'm glad it was you."

I glance over my shoulder and force a smile for her. "Me too," I murmur. At least that much is true. For a little while, I let myself get caught up in her. I allowed myself to forget that everything I touch decays.

This is exactly why I didn't want to marry her, why I've been running from her for so long — because she deserves better. Despite that, something dark and twisted spreads through my heart, reminding me that she's *mine*

now, that her body will never know anyone but me. I glance at her, barely able to suppress my need to carry her to our bedroom and fuck her until my name is the only word she remembers.

I try to resist, but I find myself walking back toward her, my anger simmering as I take the mug out of her hands. “Faye,” I murmur, my hands cupping her cheeks gently, my tone laced with desperation. “I gave you one chance and you blew it. I will never again show you the leniency I showed you then. Do you understand?” My voice is soft, deceiving. “I’ll be good to you, baby,” I reassure her. “I’ll be the best husband you could ever ask for — so long as you remain a good girl for me. Fuck with me again, and I’ll punish you.”

“H-how?” she asks, her voice quivering. “How would you punish me? Would it be like… like last night?”

There’s something in her eyes I can’t quite read. Fear. Curiosity. *Trust*. One of my hands moves to grab her chin, and I press my thumb against her lips, pushing them apart. She opens her sexy mouth a little further and softly bites down on my thumb. It reminds me of that time I stood in her dressing room, telling her that I didn’t want his name on her lips, and just like that, my cock hardens, like it did then.

“If I find out you’ve so much as dreamed bout him, I’ll force you to your knees and make him watch as you choke on my cock,” I threaten. She makes a soft delicious sound in the back of her throat, and my cock jerks, begging for her touch. I meant for it to be a threat, but she looks like she’d enjoy that.

I tighten my grip on her chin, and her tongue brushes against the edges of my thumb, as though she’s trying to show me how she’d suck my cock. Is she trying to drive me fucking wild? I thought I’d scarred her last night, but instead, I seem to have lit a fire in her.

“I don’t want to punish you, beautiful, but I will if I have to.” I let go of her cheek and slide my hand down her body, leaving it resting on her thigh. My words don’t seem to deter her at all. My usually meek wife looks at me with defiance in her eyes that only spells trouble. “If you do more than dream of him, I’ll tie you to our bed and canvas every inch of your body, leaving a kiss mark on your skin for every single word you spoke to him. I’ll mark you for the whole world to see, Faye. I’ll turn you on beyond reason only to leave you desperate. I won’t let you come, my darling wife. I’ll keep you right at the edge until you remember who you belong to, until

you're begging me for forgiveness. You don't want that, do you? You want to be good for me, don't you?"

She nods, her gaze eager, as though she truly wants to please me. I smile at her as my hand moves between her legs, only to find her dripping and bare underneath my shirt. I was so scared I'd damn her, but fuck, the devil dances in her eyes just as he does in mine. She's perfect for me.

I gently stroke her clit, and her eyes widen, a soft hiss escaping her lips as she jerks away. Her confidence fades, and she looks at me with such utter vulnerability that I immediately want to do all I can to reassure her.

I gently brush my hands over her arms, the gesture soothing. "You're sore, angel," I murmur. "Let me draw you a nice warm bath, hmm? It'll make you feel better."

She looks hesitant, the trust she'd shown me earlier gone now. "I won't touch you," I promise her. "I will never hurt you, Faye. Not unless you want me to."

It's a lie, of course. I've already taken so much from her, and whether I like it or not, simply being with me will end up hurting her.

It's a lie, but maybe if I say it often enough, I can deceive us both.

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Chapter Twenty-Nine

DION

The pleased look in my grandmother's eyes grates on me, and I level her with an unamused stare. "Grandmother," I murmur as I walk further into my living room. "To what do I owe this pleasure so soon after the wedding?" She's barely given us a full day to ourselves. Surely we deserve a reprieve after so perfectly performing our roles in her ridiculous play.

Her eyes linger on my mother's piano in the corner before she turns to face me. "Does it still sound as beautiful as it used to?" she asks, her voice soft.

I grit my teeth, my stomach churning at the memory of finding Faye seated behind my mother's piano, entirely clueless about the way each chord she played further destroyed me. She looked so serene, and I didn't have the power to wrench her away from something that so clearly brought her the kind of happiness I can never give her.

Sending that piano to my house while I was away, knowing Faye would instantly fall in love with it, was a calculated risk and a really low blow. I hate that it worked out in her favor, but what I hate even more is that I can't figure out her motivations.

Does she aim to torment me by making me face the past I've been running from? Or had it been a test to see how I'd respond to Faye crossing a line I'd never let anyone else near? Whatever it was, she gambled and won.

“I don’t appreciate you involving my wife in your schemes,” I murmur. “I refuse to play along like Ares and Luca did.”

She crosses her arms, her expression ice cold. “You married her, didn’t you?”

I freeze, unable to refute her words. “You left me no choice — but your involvement ends here. I won’t have you manipulate my wife.”

Warmth simmers in her eyes, the edges of her lips tipping up into a cryptic smile. “Your *wife*,” she repeats. “You’re awfully protective of a woman you wanted nothing to do with for years. It seems I worried for nothing.”

She’s mocking me, and there’s not a word I can utter in defense. My jaw ticks, and my annoyance only heightens further when she smiles at me the way she used to when I was younger. As though she knows something I don’t, as though she finds me endearing.

“Grandma Anne?”

I tense at the sound of Faye’s sweet voice and turn to find her walking into the living room, her white dress swaying with every move. It reminds me of the shirt she’d worn yesterday morning, when I’d placed her on top of our kitchen counter.

Faye pauses a few steps away from me, her gaze darting toward me and back to the floor, a gorgeous blush blooming across her cheeks. I bite back a smile, the tension in my body slowly draining away.

“Faye, sweetheart,” Grandma says, grinning at her so genuinely that I do a double-take. It’s been years since I saw my grandmother smile like that. “The house looks beautiful. I can’t believe you decorated it all by yourself. That’s some talent you have there, honey.”

I stand back and watch my wife come out of her shell just a little. She’s been hiding from me all day, and I’ve given her the space she so obviously craves — just like I did last night, when she’d pretended to be asleep. I’m not sure what she was thinking. Did she truly believe I’d touch her when her body was still recovering?

The duality of her is intriguing — when I’ve got her aroused, she becomes an entirely different person, and I suspect that version is far closer to the real her than the shy girl standing in front of me right now, engaging in small talk with my grandmother.

“I’m here today to discuss some of your new responsibilities and the rules you’ll both have to adhere to,” Grandma says, and I shift my focus

back to her.

Faye nods, her expression serious. I study her carefully as she tenses and squares her shoulders. It's intriguing how eager she is to please, and it makes her defiance with Eric all the more infuriating.

"Later today, I'll send over Lauren, your housekeeper, and Garret, your chauffeur. They're both excited to meet you," Grandma tells Faye, and I grimace. Eager to spy on us for her, she means. The way her fingers twitch at her side makes me suspect that Faye realizes it too.

I take in every single change in her expression as she speaks to my grandmother. Every movement, every sigh. Everything about her is so carefully controlled, so calculated. I suppose that's why I'm so eager to provoke her. Watching her lose her composure is fucking glorious.

I have no doubt she's as surprised by her responses to me as I am, especially considering she was a virgin before our wedding night. The way she sucked down on my thumb and the startling eagerness when I told her I'd punish her for going anywhere near Eric makes me suspect that what she's shown me so far is but the tip of the iceberg. I'm starting to suspect that she truly is far more perfect for me than I'd anticipated.

"Considering how long the two of you were engaged, I take it you don't need me to remind you of the rules?"

Faye shakes her head. "A minimum of three years of a faithful marriage that we're both giving our best shot, no more than three consecutive days apart throughout that time, and sharing a bedroom," she summarizes, glossing over the finer details of our contract.

"In that case, all that remains is for me to hand over some of the charities and foundations I've been running, starting with the one that's dearest to me — The Windsor Staccato Foundation."

I flinch involuntarily, my entire body tensing. Is she fucking with me right now? Grandma looks at me as though she's daring me to speak up, and when I remain silent, she smiles in victory. "It's the foundation that my daughter-in-law founded with your mother," she continues. "Dion keeps it funded, but there is far more that could be done with it. Its aim is to provide free music classes for those who can't afford it, and to nurture talent when we find it. Both of your mothers firmly believed that access to music was a basic right that should never be withheld from any child, and I suspect you feel the same."

That foundation was one of the prime reasons I agreed to marry Faye at all, but Grandma knows I want nothing to do with it outside of ensuring its preservation. First the piano, now this. Why is she doing this to me?

I can't even argue with her, because she's right. This is a cause Faye will genuinely care about. The foundation would be safe in her hands.

"I won't let you down," Faye says, her voice shaking.

Grandma smiles at her reassuringly. "I know you won't." It's odd how grandmotherly she becomes around Faye. I didn't realize that part of her still existed — I thought it'd died alongside my parents.

I breathe a sigh of relief when she finally walks toward the exit after dominating Faye's attention for far longer than I should've allowed. Each time I see my grandmother, I'm left with a sensation of impending doom. This marriage is complicated enough without her interference.

"Oh, and Faye?" she says as she reaches the door, her tone somewhat dismayed. "Your father called me today. He told me he couldn't reach you and would like to remind you of your concert next week."

My wife flinches, and I frown. Something about her reaction registers as being decidedly *off*. I thought she loved being a concert pianist. Is there something I'm missing?

The door falls closed, and Faye stares at it absentmindedly. "You don't have to work if you don't want to, you know?" I murmur. "If you don't enjoy the concerts, or if you just need a break, that's fine. You're a Windsor now, Faye. You don't have to do anything you don't want to."

She turns to look at me, and a thrill runs down my spine. I doubt she realizes that this is the first time she's properly looked me in the eye all day. "I'd be nothing without the piano," she murmurs, her eyes oddly vacant. "Please don't take that away from me."

I frown and close the distance between us. "I don't have the power to take anything away from you, angel. I'm your husband, not your warden."

She looks at me and nods, but the distrust and fear in her eyes don't diminish. I'm not entirely sure what I've done to earn it, nor do I know how to undo it.

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Chapter Thirty

FAYE

"You look beautiful tonight," Dion says as the car stops in front of the concert hall, his gaze roaming over my body appreciatively. "I'm sorry I'll have to miss your concert, Faye."

I try to force a smile, but all I accomplish is making him frown in concern. He reaches for me and gently tucks my hair behind my ear. The way he studies me is unnerving. He does this sometimes; he stares at me as though he can see everything I try so hard to hide, and it scares me.

"You're nervous," he murmurs. "I thought you'd be used to playing in front of a crowd by now, but I suppose it never gets any easier. Think about what I said, Faye. If you feel like you need a break, take one."

I nod absentmindedly, unable to tell him the truth. How do I explain that it isn't performing that I fear — it's my father? It's only been a week since our wedding, but in that time, I've started to feel at home in Dion's house. For a few days, I felt safe and comfortable, and the thought of returning to the reality that awaits me is terrifying.

Dion has treated me with such kindness and care that it's been easy to forget about everything but him. We've fallen into a routine of sorts. I spend my days much the same as I used to, focusing primarily on piano practice, while the time I used to spend preparing for the wedding is now spent on charities and foundations. Dion has offered me a lot more help than I'd

expected. I thought he'd ignore me for the most part, as he did in the years before our marriage, but he's been incredibly attentive.

He went back to work the Monday after our wedding, but he's made it home for dinner every night, taking his time to chat with me and enquire about my day. It's been surreal to have dinner without a single hint of fear, and I doubt he has any idea how much I've come to enjoy it. I'll miss it while he's away.

"Will you be okay during your flight?" I ask carefully.

He smiles at me and nods. "Yeah," he murmurs. "Don't you worry, Faye. I'll be fine, I promise. If the deal negotiations proceed as expected, I'll be back in two days."

I nod in understanding. If he doesn't get the paperwork signed before then, I'll have to join him in Canada so we don't breach his grandmother's terms.

"It'll be odd to fall asleep without you in my arms," he murmurs.

I look up sharply, my face heating.

"I think I'll miss this hot little mouth," he whispers, leaning in. His lips brush against mine, and I melt into him, instantly kissing him back. It isn't just at dinner that Dion has been trying to get to know me — he's made every effort to learn all about my body too, and I've enjoyed it more than I care to admit. With each day that passes, I find myself more intrigued by him. Nothing about our marriage is what I expected it to be.

He pulls away and drops his forehead to mine. "Be good for me while I'm away," he orders, his voice soft. He cups my cheek and looks into my eyes, his gaze searching. Surely he doesn't still think I'd go behind his back and contact Eric? I nod at him, uncertain what to say. How would he respond if I admit it hadn't even occurred to me? That I haven't *wanted* to.

Dion presses a lingering kiss to my forehead and sighs. "Go," he murmurs. "I'll see you in two days."

I nod as Garret opens the door for me, my eyes trailing back to Dion one last time before I exit the car. For years I was scared of him, now I find myself scared without him. His mere presence is soothing to me, as though nothing can harm me when he's by my side, and to a certain extent, that's true.

My steps are reluctant as I head toward my dressing room, where I know my father is waiting for me. This building and the room I'm standing

in front of are so familiar, yet they feel foreign. Never before have I been so reluctant, so defeated.

It wasn't until I carefully opened my dressing room door that I realized what had changed. I never quite understood how powerful it would be to have someone in my life who treats me with respect and kindness, and who gives me the freedom to speak my mind without fear of retaliation.

I'm not foolish enough to take it for anything other than the alliance it is — I hold no romantic notions toward my husband, not even when his gaze fills with passion, or when he tells me how perfect he thinks I am. I'm aware he's making the best of the situation we were forced into, but even so, I'm grateful for it, because it's far more than I'd expected.

"Faye," my father sneers as I walk in. "*You're late*."

My entire body tenses at the sound of his voice, resignation washing over me. "I'm sorry, Father," I reply immediately, deep shame taking root in my stomach. I hate the helplessness I feel, and far worse, I hate how selfish I've been. For a couple of days, I allowed myself to forget about Abigail and my sisters.

"Come here," he says, his eyes blazing with fury.

I'm trembling as I walk up to him, my steps reluctant. My stomach twists violently, and I take a steadying breath as his hand wraps around my throat. "You dare make me wait now?" he asks.

I shake my head and swallow hard. "N-no, Father. I… I had to wait for Dion. H-he insisted we drive t-together."

He loosens his hold on me then, seemingly pleased. "Good," he murmurs, letting his hand fall away. I don't dare move, but every instinct in my body is telling me to get out of his reach. "I suppose that's something, but it doesn't explain why he's leaving you all alone after barely a week of marriage. Why is he going on a weekend away with his secretary, Faye? You couldn't even keep him invested for a week? Surely having a young, innocent wife should be thrilling for him? It should've been enough to divert his attention away from Maria, but I shouldn't be surprised that you aren't even good at keeping your legs spread. *Pathetic*."

I look down at the floor, unable to bear the hatred in his eyes after being enveloped in kindness for days. Dion built me up, only to make the fall harder. I've never felt quite as worthless as I do right now, and I hate the way Father is making me doubt Dion. It hadn't even occurred to me he'd be alone with Maria all weekend.

“Try harder,” he warns. “You need to get pregnant. Once you two have a child, he’ll never be able to leave you. Seduce him, play every trick in the book. Do whatever you must, but you’d better get pregnant as soon as you can. If you don’t, he’ll throw you out in three years and we’ll lose access to the Windsors.”

I can feel bile rise up my throat and swallow it down. The thought of deceiving and entrapping Dion in that way sickens me more than anything else ever has. Getting married was supposed to be the solution to all our problems. I thought the girls and I would finally get a reprieve, that things would finally get better. I’ve never been more wrong.

I’ll always be trapped, and there’s no escape.

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Chapter Thirty-One

DION

I walk into the house, only to pause at the sound of a haunting melody that I don't recognize. It's beautiful yet filled with such deep pain and despair that it's almost hard to listen to.

My heart is pounding wildly as I step into our dark living room, Faye's silhouette illuminated by the moonlight streaming in through the windows. She's in a white, silky nightgown tonight, and I can't take my eyes off her. It isn't just the way her long hair falls down her straight back or the speed and grace at which her fingers move, nor is it the fact that she's playing my mother's piano in a way I won't soon forget.

It's the way her eyes are closed, her head tipped back just a little, as though she's losing herself in her music — she looks like she's misery personified but doesn't want to be, like she's clinging to the last shreds of her sanity.

I'm so captivated by her that I nearly fail to notice her ivories are no longer… ivory. They're stained with a vibrant red, and my heart constricts painfully.

I walk up to her and gently grab her shoulders, startling her. Her hands pause, and I note the way they shake, the tips of her fingers bloody. She doesn't turn to look at me. Instead, she begins to play again, ignoring her injuries and my presence.

"Stop," I plead, kneeling behind her. "You're hurting yourself, Faye."

I wrap my arms around her and reach for her wrists, keeping them in place as I rest my chin on her shoulder. “I can’t,” she tells me, her voice breaking. “I can’t stop. Please don’t make me stop, Dion. I need this. I need… I need to feel *alive*. This is… it’s all I have.”

I turn her around on her piano bench so she’s facing me, my gaze dropping to her hands. I take them into mine carefully, studying her broken skin. She must’ve been playing for hours — at least ten, if I’m guessing correctly, based on her injuries and my own personal experience.

“No,” I murmur as I lift her hand to my lips and kiss the back of it, steering clear of the parts that must hurt. “That’s not all you have, Faye. You’ve got *me*. Tell me what you need.”

She finally lifts her gaze to look at me then, and the vulnerability in her beautiful deep blues takes my breath away. She looks desperate and broken, and it fucking kills me, because I know exactly what it’s like to feel that way. I know how hard it is to claw your way out of that kind of darkness.

What I don’t understand is what brought this on. Is it me? She seemed fine all week. Did my leaving finally give her enough time to digest everything that’s happened between us? Did I do this to her? If being trapped in this marriage with me is destroying her already, how much will be left of her in the end?

“I need… I need to *forget*,” she whispers.

Pain unlike anything I’ve ever known tears through me, and I nod. I can pretty much guess what she needs to forget, or *who*.

I look into her eyes as I place my hands on her legs, my movements slow, careful. She inhales sharply when I part them, some of her despondency wavering as her nightgown bunches around her hips, revealing her white lace panties. “Let me show you a different kind of escape,” I murmur, my voice soft.

She nods, her gaze unreadable as I lean in and kiss her thigh, working my way up slowly, my touch rougher than she’s used to. I leave little marks all over her skin, and the soft gasps that escape her throat soothe my tattered soul.

My lips brush over the lace she’s wearing, and a soft moan fills the room. “Missed this pussy,” I murmur, my teeth wrapping around the fabric. I push it aside and press another kiss to her bare skin. Faye’s hand moves into my hair, and I glance up at her as I drag my tongue right down her

pussy in one fluid, slow movement. She moans loudly, her eyes on mine, fire flickering in them.

I do it again, needing to see her burn for me. Both nights without her were torture — I've imagined fucking her with my tongue just the way I am right now, flicking past her clit, circling it the way that makes her arousal spike without sending her over the edge.

I drag my tongue down and push it in, drawing a whimper from her. Having her seated beside her piano, her gaze burning with need and her eyes blind to everything but me… *fuck*. I close my eyes when I feel her tremble, barely able to take it. My cock is throbbing with need, but this isn't about me. I gently suck on her sensitive clit, and her moans get louder, needier.

"*Dion*," she pleads. "*Yes*."

Her grip on my hair tightens, and she pushes her hips into my face harder. There's something so fucking sexy about seeing my wife be honest with her feelings for once — no hiding, no pretenses, just her chasing a high she trusts me to give. Her fingers graze over my scalp, and my own desire spikes as I flick her clit with my tongue, setting a pace that I know will push her over.

I don't think I've ever wanted anything more. I need her to come just like this, with my mouth on her pussy and my name on her lips. I need this as badly as she does. Knowing that I'm the one who took away her sorrow and replaced it with the pure lust that's overtaken her is fucking priceless. I may not be able to offer her the consolation she needs, nor will I ever be the man she deserves, but I can give her *this*.

My wife comes on my tongue just like that, with her pussy fluttering around my fingers as her moans fill our living room, her legs wrapped around my neck. I keep lapping at her until she comes down from her high, my eyes finding hers. There's still sorrow in them, but the weight of it has lessened.

I move from my position on my knees and sit back on the floor, extending my legs around her bench, my palms pressed to the marble underneath me as I lean back. I should move, but I'm enchanted — I can't help but watch her for a moment, taking her in in all her glory, with her hair wild and her legs parted, a ravenous look in her eyes. It's hard to believe that she's mine, yet the wedding ring around her finger proves it.

I expect her to snap out of it and hide away, but instead she reaches for me and places her hands on my shoulders, her grip tight as she lowers herself onto my lap. She looks up at me as she seats herself on my thighs, her hands trembling as she undoes the button on my pants. I inhale sharply when she frees my cock, my eyes falling closed for a moment.

Faye lifts herself up a little and positions me at her entrance, her eyes on mine when she slowly takes my cock, her pussy tight, hot, and utterly perfect. “Fuck,” I groan, my hands still behind me to hold me up. I’m itching to touch her, to turn us over and take her with desperate strokes, but instead, I let her take control. “Ride me,” I whisper. “Take what you need from me, Faye. I’m yours for the taking.”

She whimpers and lowers her full weight on top of me until I’m buried deep inside her. I groan, my heart hammering in my chest.

She looks at me like I’m her salvation, blissfully unaware that I’m the reason she needs saving. I’ll lead her to her ruin, and in doing so, I’ll damn us both.

Even so… I won’t let her go. I can’t.

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Chapter Thirty-Two

Dion

I'm not sure how long I've been staring at my phone before I finally click the dial button. Silas picks up almost immediately, before I've even figured out what to say to him.

"Something is wrong," he murmurs when I don't speak up straight away, his usual mocking tone absent. "What happened, Dion?"

I sigh and glance out my office window. "Careful," I murmur. "You sound so concerned that I might start to believe we're friends."

Silas chuckles. "We are," he says simply. "Tell me what happened so we can fix it."

"I'm not sure," I admit. "It's Faye."

He falls silent then. "Had it been any of your brothers, I'd have worried you were calling with some kind of dumb unreasonable request," he says, his tone light. "Ares called me with a weird request once, you know? It was long before he knew he'd be marrying Raven. He asked me to put bodyguards on her secretly because he'd been so worried about her safety. He was too stupid to realize his concern far outweighed what is acceptable between friends."

I smile, my mood lifting slightly. That sounds exactly like the kind of thing Ares would do.

"And Luca once called to ask me which restaurant Valentina was going to on a date, only to buy the entire place and crash the date. This was *after*

he tried to enforce a company-wide dating ban to stop it from happening, mind you."

This time I chuckle, and it strikes me then — he's trying to cheer me up. In his own way, he's trying to tell me I'm not the first Windsor to call him with a potentially strange request relating to my wife.

"Every fiber of my being is telling me something is wrong with her, but I don't know what it is. She seemed fine after the wedding. Things were better than I'd even dared hope for, until I went on a trip to Canada for the weekend. I came home to find her… in a precarious mental state. She seemed more broken than ever before, more so than she had been in the months leading up to our wedding."

"Were there any signs that something was wrong before you left?"

I hesitate. "Yes. She seemed reluctant to perform that weekend, but I hadn't given it much thought and left anyway." I pause, a hint of contempt running down my spine. Did she see Eric at her performance? Or did she sneak away to meet him while I was in Canada?

"Your grandmother requested invisible but impenetrable protection for her from the very second you were married," he says quietly. "She's been more restless about Faye than she has been about Raven or Val, so I oversaw your wife personally while you were away. There were only three people she came into contact with in that time: your driver, your housekeeper, and her father. She didn't linger after her performance. Faye went straight home and didn't leave the house until you came back."

I nod, uncertain. "She denied anything was wrong, but something triggered her," I murmur. Her behavior was too similar to my own in the past, and I'd recognize that kind of despondency no matter how hard she tried to hide it. She hadn't been like that in Hawaii or in the week prior, when we'd been wrapped up in each other, both of us trying to get used to our marriage in our own ways. When I came back from Canada, it was almost as though she'd lost all hope and wished despair would swallow her whole. It terrified me, because what I saw in her eyes was the same kind of sorrow that nearly stole me away from my family. "I want you to watch her closely. If she steps foot outside of our house, I want eyes on her. I'm not sure what kind of threat I'm looking for, but I can feel it, Silas. Something is wrong."

"We'll get to the bottom of this," he murmurs, his tone conveying his concern. "In the meantime, you should work on earning her trust. She's

your wife, Dion. You shouldn't have to spy on her like this."

"I know," I murmur, my heart twisting painfully. I did this. I enforced so much distance between us she won't even tell me what made her play until her fingers bled. She'll give me her body freely, but no more than that, and I only have myself to blame.

Initially, I thought it must've been about Eric, but the longer I think about it, the less likely it seems. If she'd loved him enough to inspire such despair, she wouldn't have ridden me the way she did. She wouldn't have let me near her like that at all, and she certainly wouldn't have looked me in the eye as she came for me *twice*. I don't think it was him she was referring to when she told me she needed to forget.

I'm still lost in thought an hour later when Maria walks into my office. "Dion?" she says, startling me. Her expression tells me she's been trying to get my attention for a while now, and I sigh as I straighten in my seat.

She walks toward me with a folder in her hands, only to pause in the middle of the room. She slowly twirls around, her eyes roaming over the walls. "This office is so different from your smaller one in London," she murmurs. "I'm not sure I'll ever get used to this."

"Yeah," I sigh. "Me too." It's been quite an adjustment, and not just because of Faye. Coming back has been more complicated than I thought it'd be. For a little while, I deluded myself into thinking I'd escaped my demons, only to find them waiting for me the moment I returned home.

Maria stares at me, her expression forlorn, and guilt instantly starts to eat at me. "Maria, you know you didn't have to come with me, right? I know I'm asking a lot of you, and all of your friends and family live in London. I'd understand if you wanted to stay there. Just say the word, and I'll write you a glowing letter of recommendation."

She looks down for a moment, her short blonde hair brushing over her shoulders. "You never asked," she says, her tone different to usual. "I *offered* to come with you, but I wish you'd asked."

We've been working together for nearly ten years now, having met at university. In all that time, she's always been professional. Today is the first time she's showing me some vulnerability, and I'm not sure how to handle it.

"I'm grateful," I say eventually. "I hope you know that."

Maria nods and pastes a smile on to her face, but it doesn't quite reach her eyes. "Of course. You wouldn't last a day without me, you know?"

I study her for a moment, trying to decipher her mellow mood. It wouldn't surprise me if she's homesick. "I won't hold it against you if you change your mind, Maria. If you want to move back, I'll fully support you."

She looks away and grimaces. "No," she says, her voice soft. "I want to be by your side. There's so much left to do with the relocation and our existing contracts, and it'll be tough on you. You can't do everything alone, Dion. It's okay to rely on people every once in a while."

I nod. "I do rely on you."

"Not as much as I want you to," she murmurs, before shaking her head and pasting on that professional expression I've grown accustomed to. "I actually came in to bring you the budgets for the Windsor Staccato Foundation," she tells me, before I have a chance to respond to her earlier comment.

I frown. "Shouldn't this have been given to Faye?"

Maria freezes, surprise flashing through her eyes. "The foundation has always been important to you, so I figured you'd want the final say. You never even wanted your grandmother to interfere with it more than she needed to."

I purse my lips as I take the folder from her, my mind already trailing back to Faye. Perhaps this would be a good distraction for her, something to give her purpose. She's thrown herself into the administrative work behind our charities, but perhaps a more active role would be good for her. I think she'd love to teach. I'll have to suggest it to her.

"Dion?"

I look up and raise my brows.

"You always said your marriage was just a familial obligation, and that you couldn't care less who you married. For years, you acted that way too. Did something change?"

I frown, confused by her question. Maria is probably my only friend other than Xavier, so it isn't entirely out of the ordinary for her to ask me this, but somehow, it doesn't sit well with me. "Why do you ask?"

She looks into my eyes, a weak smile on her lips. "I was just curious," she says. "I want you to be happy. Being forced into a marriage with someone you don't really know, someone who is far too young to truly be your equal, it just seems… I'm just worried you'll end up settling for less than you deserve. Making the best of a bad situation isn't the same as pursuing true happiness."

I look away. “I would never cheat on my wife,” I tell her, my voice harsh. “So my only choice is to make the best of it and give my marriage a chance.”

“For now,” Maria says, her tone sharp. “In three years, you’ll have complied with your grandmother’s terms, and you’ll be able to divorce her. Then what? Three years will fly by.”

Unease runs down my spine, and I look away. I always knew I’d marry Faye, and I never considered that it didn’t have to be forever. I always assumed I’d only marry once in my life, yet twice now, I’ve been reminded that I could lose her.

Maria shoots me a sweet smile before walking out, leaving me with my spiraling thoughts. It never occurred to me that I truly may have to let Faye go in three years.

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Chapter Thirty-Three

FAYE

I'm in partial disbelief as Lauren, our housekeeper, leads Raven into the living room. She smiles at me as I jump to my feet, pulling my fingers away from the piano.

Dion and I have existed in our own little bubble since getting married. For the first few weeks, we're exempt from having to attend the usually mandatory weekly family dinner with everyone else, and I've been beyond grateful for it. It's kept me from being overwhelmed while adjusting to our marriage, but I knew the reprieve wouldn't last. Raven dropping by is likely the first indication of it.

"I hope I'm not interrupting," she says, her tone apologetic. "I called earlier, but I couldn't reach you, so I thought I'd stop by to see if you were home."

"Not at all," I reassure her, despite my nerves. I've never been alone with her before, and I'm not sure how to act. "Please, come in."

She nods and glances around the living room, her eyes sparkling. "Your home's interior is truly stunning," she says, a hint of awe in her voice. "Who designed it?"

I'm lost for words. Is she attempting to flatter me, or is her praise genuine? "Um, I did."

Raven's eyes widen. "You didn't hire an interior designer?"

I shake my head. “Dion said I could do it myself if I wanted to, so I did.”

“Wow,” she murmurs. “Ares and I had our house renovated not too long ago, but it isn’t anywhere near as nice as this. Did you study interior design?”

I shake my head, uncomfortable. “I did look up some basics, but mostly, this was all me. I’d love to take a course someday, though.”

Raven looks around excitedly, and just as she parts her lips to ask more questions, Lauren walks in with cups of tea for both of us, along with a platter of cookies. She grins at Raven. “Your grandmother sent these over for Faye,” she murmurs. “I have successfully kept that tidbit of information from Sierra.”

I watch as the famous model swipes a cookie from the plate and shoves it into her mouth, crumbs falling all over her clothes. She catches me looking and slaps a hand over her mouth, soft laughter escaping her lips.

“I’m sorry,” she says once she’s done chewing. “The cookies… it’s a thing. Sierra and I have been fighting over these cookies for years, so now when I see them, I instinctively just grab them. I’ve gotten used to having to be quicker than she is. You’ll find out soon enough. Once Sierra learns you’ve got cookies, she’ll come knocking.”

I stare at her wide-eyed and push the plate toward her. “You can have all of them,” I tell her awkwardly. I love the cookies, but I’m not sure I love them as much as she does.

She bursts out laughing and grabs her bag. “I’m going to send Sierra a picture. I know she’s stuck in a meeting right now, so she’ll be fuming. It’ll be fun.”

My heart aches as I watch her, a new kind of longing rushing through me. I know that Sierra and Raven were best friends long before Raven married Ares, but witnessing their friendship fills me with a type of envy I’ve never felt before. I’ve never really had friends of my own, and what they have seems beyond anything I could even hope for.

“Here,” Raven says, handing me a couple of fashion magazines. “This is what I actually came for.”

I take them from her, my eyes widening when I realize that these are brand catalogues — mostly hers.

“I’m the official Windsor stylist,” she says, grinning as she takes a bite of another cookie. “As you’ll soon learn, we try to keep most things in the

family rather than relying on anyone else, so I dress all of us. I'm here to find out what you like. I've got a pretty good idea based on the last few times I saw you, but I wanted to check in anyway and make sure you chose a few of your favorite pieces."

I blink in confusion. "You mean you won't just choose for me?"

She hesitates and nods. "Is that what your previous stylist did?" she asks, her voice soft, cautious. "Did they pick your clothes without any input from you?"

I freeze, suddenly unsure of how to answer her. She seems to notice my discomfort, because she starts to flick through one of the magazines and hands it to me.

"How do you feel about a casual style like that?" she asks, showing me a girl dressed in dark jeans and a cute emerald top.

"I can wear jeans if I want to?" I ask without thinking.

Something flashes in Raven's eyes, and when she smiles at me again, it doesn't reach her eyes. "You're a Windsor," she says as she begins to take notes. "You can wear whatever you want, Faye. You could leave the house in a garbage bag with a hole cut out for your head, and The Herald will praise you for setting a new affordable fashion standard." She grits her teeth then. "Or they'll tear you apart for some kind of fabricated reason that'll increase their advertising revenue and clicks. They're good at that."

I tense, remembering the articles they wrote about her, and the way they incited people to turn against her and her brand. She runs a hand through her hair and shakes her head.

"I never got to thank you properly," I murmur, changing the subject. "For my wedding dress."

She smiles at me sweetly. "It was my pleasure. You looked truly radiant, and Dion couldn't take his eyes off you. The way he carried you out of the reception hall was the stuff of fairytales."

Her cheeks becoming a little rosy, and I can't help but blush alongside her as I think back to our wedding night. I guess that was when I'd begun to trust Dion — when he gave me pleasure instead of pain, despite his blazing anger.

"How did you know?" I ask carefully.

Raven's eyes roam over my face, and she does that thing that's always made me feel unsettled around her. She looks at me as though my secrets are written all over my face.

“One day I had to review the boutique’s security footage because I’d lost my bracelet, and I saw you staring at that dress.” Her tone is careful, and she hesitates for a moment. “Something about the way you looked didn’t sit well with me, so I reviewed the security footage of all your visits. Each time, you stared at that dress in awe, but you never even asked to try it on.”

I tense, suddenly feeling vulnerable. It never even occurred to me there were cameras in her boutique.

“Faye,” she says, her voice soft. “My security system is very comprehensive, and it includes sound. I wasn’t comfortable with how dismissive your stepmother and half-sisters were of you, or the way they spoke of you when you weren’t in the room. It reminded me a little of the way my mother and sister always treated me. It’s why I asked them to leave on your wedding day.”

I stare at her, hearing the careful warning she’s trying to give me. My first instinct is to stand up for my family, even though I know she’s right. I’ve always pretended not to notice, but I’m aware of their snide remarks when they think I’m not listening — the jealousy related to my piano career and my arranged marriage to Dion. They’re all I have, so I’ve always dismissed it, but I’m not sure how to defend them in the face of a woman who looks like she genuinely understands my pain.

Before I have a chance to find the right words to say, Raven begins to show me a variety of other outfits, endless questions pouring out of her mouth. Gracefully and compassionately, she gives me an out instead of forcing me to acknowledge something that clearly matters to her.

“Accosting my wife, are you, Rave?”

We both look up to find Dion walking into the living room, an indulgent smile on his face. He glances at me, his gaze lingering.

I rise to my feet, and he walks up to me, his arm wrapping around my waist naturally as he leans down to press a kiss on top of my head.

He’s been so careful and gentle with me since he found me seated behind his piano with bloodied fingers, and I’m beyond grateful for it. I felt so lost when I realized that getting married hadn’t changed anything at all, but he held me together in a way I’d never expected of him. At each turn, Dion continues to surprise me. I thought he’d demand answers, but all he gave me was silent and unwavering support. It’s more than I deserve.

“You’re home early,” I murmur. My face heats when I see Raven beaming up at us from the sofa, but Dion simply ignores her gleeful stares.

He nods and pulls me closer. “Something came up at work, so I have to go back to London for a few days. I thought maybe we could go together.”

I look at him in surprise, my heart warming. I thought he’d use his work trips to get some space from me. “I’ve never been,” I tell him. “I’d love to join you.”

My excitement dims as an unwanted thought springs to the forefront of my mind. This time, Father won’t be able to blame me for Dion’s absence, since I’ll be with him.

My stomach twists, and I avert my gaze as my father’s words resound through my head. *You need to get pregnant, Faye. Once you two have a child, he’ll never be able to leave you. You useless, spineless, disgusting little thing.*

“Faye?”

I look up to find both Raven and Dion staring at me with hints of concern in their eyes. He’s been looking at me that way more and more frequently since that night a few weeks ago, when he came home from Canada earlier than I’d expected.

It’s becoming harder to fake it in his presence when I so desperately crave moments of genuineness with him. I’m tired of playing the role my father wrote for me, and the only times I get to be myself is when I’m in his arms.

Even that is tainted now.

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Chapter Thirty-Four

FAYE

"I've been trying to get you to smile like that for weeks," Dion tells me as we park on the tarmac, right at the entrance of a large black private jet with the Windsor crest on it in gold. "If I'd known taking you on a trip would do it, I'd have carried you onto a plane every single day."

My eyes widen in horror on his behalf, and he chuckles. "Don't even joke about it," I murmur. "I'd hate to see you suffering every day."

His gaze roams over my face, searching. "You care about me, huh?"

I frown at him. "Of course, Dion. You're my husband."

His eyes flash, and he leans in, his lips brushing against mine. "That's the first time you've called me your husband," he murmurs, before kissing me slowly, softly. His hand moves to my face, and he cups my cheek gently as he tears his lips off mine. "You act like my wife in bed, but not outside of it," he adds, his tone somewhat bitter. "Our conversations are still overly polite and distant. You won't let me in."

I tense, startled. "I… I didn't…"

I didn't think that's something you'd want.

If I let you in, you wouldn't like what you'd find.

You haven't let me in either.

I'm not even sure what I'm trying to say. I know what it is he truly wants to know, of course. He's been wondering why I played until I bled, but there's no way for me to explain that to him. How do I tell him that

being ordered to manipulate him into staying married to me tainted everything I thought we could've had together? How do I tell him that I'd thought my marriage to him was a blessing in disguise, only to find out my father never intended to let me leave his clutches? I've never felt so hopeless before. I'll never be free, not truly, and there's nothing I can do about it.

"Come on," he murmurs. "We don't have much time left before takeoff."

Dion offers me his hand as we walk up the steps to the plane, and with each step we take, he becomes more tense. It's hard for me to fathom how he does this on a near weekly basis when it affects him so badly.

"This plane is much bigger than the last one we were on," I murmur. "So hopefully it'll be a smoother flight."

He nods, his face a little paler than before. Maria is standing next to the pilot and falls silent mid-conversation when she notices me behind Dion, confusion flickering through her eyes before she forces a smile.

"Faye," she says, smiling. Her eyes drop to our joined hands, and she abruptly tears her gaze away. "I didn't realize you'd be here. Let me check if all the paperwork is in order for you to join us."

She steps away as Dion leads me down the aisle, and I take in our surroundings. This plane is laid out like a large living room, with comfortable sofas in the back and a few rows of chairs facing each other, with tables in between. "Where do you want to sit?" Dion asks, and I look up at him, taking in his increasing anxiety.

"Which seat would make you most comfortable?" I ask in return.

He smiles and leads me to the sofa in the back. "How about here?" he murmurs. "I like being able to stretch out my legs."

I nod and sit down in the seat he chose for me, and he chuckles when he realizes I can't quite place my feet flat on the floor.

"This plane was built for my siblings and me, and we're all much, *much* taller than you," he says as he kneels in front of me, surprising me. He grabs my seatbelt, taking his time to adjust it and buckle me in. I stare at him, my heart skipping a beat. He's outrageously handsome with those sharp cheekbones and his perfect face. Even his lashes are annoyingly long, and I've grown an unhealthy obsession with pushing my hand through his thick, dark hair. But that wouldn't have been enough to tear down my walls. It's the way he treats me.

“Why are you always on your knees in front of me?” I murmur.

His eyes flash, and for a moment, he leisurely drags them down my legs, no doubt remembering the last time he was in this position — in our living room. “I’d love to be on my knees *behind* you too,” he whispers. “I haven’t taken you from behind yet.”

My eyes widen and heat instantly rushes to my face, making him chuckle. “Fucking adorable,” he murmurs, before brushing the back of his hand over my cheek. “It’s because you’re so fucking small. When I stand in front of you, I have to bend down too far to kiss you. I like being at eye-level — besides, when you’re sitting and I’m on my knees, it’s easy to do *this*.” He grabs my chin and brings my face closer, pressing a lingering kiss to my lips. I flush scarlet, and he grins as he sits down next to me moments before Maria walks in our direction. He buckles himself in and places a hand on my leg as she sits down on the sofa opposite us.

“Did you want to accompany the pilot for his final checks?” she asks carefully, as though she isn’t sure I’m aware of his fear of flying. I tense at the thought of the countless times she must’ve helped him through it, an uncomfortable feeling settling in the pit of my stomach.

“It’s alright,” he says, squeezing my leg. “I think I’m fine.”

Her eyes trail down to his hand, and she jerks her gaze away. “Okay,” she replies. “Then we’ll be ready for takeoff soon.”

Dion grows increasingly restless as the minutes trickle down, and as soon as the plane is in motion, he begins to tap his foot.

“Let’s go over the client details,” Maria says, in an obvious attempt to distract him. Something about her demeanor doesn’t sit well with me. Perhaps I’m just being sensitive, but it’s almost like she’s trying to pretend I’m not here at all, or like my presence is irrelevant, unwanted even.

She begins to tell him about contract terms, points of negotiation and contestation, and so forth. Her voice is soothing, likely purposely so, and I get the feeling that this is a ritual of sorts for them. It’s selfish, but I dislike the way they interact, the way she seems to know him just as well as I do, if not better. I was always grateful that Dion didn’t pay me any attention while we’re engaged, but now I find myself silently blaming him for keeping her so close while he wanted nothing to do with me.

Dion’s thumb begins to draw circles over my skirt once we pause on the runway, and his breathing becomes more shallow. I turn to face him, my concern for him heightening by the second.

“Dion,” I murmur, interrupting Maria’s words. He glances at me, and I reach for him hesitantly, my hand trembling ever so slightly as I cup his cheek, keeping his eyes on mine. The plane begins to barrel down the runway and he clenches his jaw.

I lean in to kiss him, my touch hesitant as my lips brush over his. He groans and instantly buries his free hand in my hair, his grip tight as he kisses me roughly, devouring me. I gasp, and his tongue slides against mine, tasting, teasing. He pulls me as close as he can get me with both our seatbelts on, his hand slipping between my thighs, just below the hem of my skirt.

Turbulence shakes the plane for a moment or two, and he tears his lips off mine to bury his face in my neck, the way he did when we went to Hawaii. This time, he sucks down on my skin harshly, drawing a whimper from my lips.

I open my eyes to find Maria staring at us with a pained expression, shock and misery flashing through her eyes before she averts her gaze.

“Just a little longer and the plane will steady,” I murmur, refocusing my attention on Dion.

He nods and nips at my ear, his body trembling slightly as he continues to press soft kisses to my skin, as though my touch is as drugging to him as he is to me.

A soft sound rings over my head, and Maria instantly undoes her seatbelt, jumping off her sofa as though it scalded her, as though she can’t bear to be near us for a moment longer. It’s vicious and downright mean, but it fills me with a sense of satisfaction to know he chose to lose himself in *me* when she was right there. He *chose me*.

“Bedroom,” he murmurs, undoing my seatbelt in one swift move. I gasp when Dion lifts me into his arms and carries me through a door in the back, kicking it closed behind him. “I can’t be patient with you right now,” he warns as he seats me on the edge of the bed in a room that’s far too luxurious for a plane.

“I don’t want you to be,” I whisper as I look up at him through my lashes. “I want you to use me, Dion. Let me be your escape. Let me make you forget.”

He groans as he undoes his pants and takes out his cock, stroking it a few times. “Open your mouth,” he orders. “You won’t be able to use your safe words, so pinch my waist if you feel uncomfortable and I’ll stop.”

I immediately do as he asks, and he places his cock at the tip of my tongue. “Such a good fucking girl,” he tells me as he pushes in just a little, his hand burying in my hair. “Look at how you’re taking my cock, baby. Just look at you.”

I close my lips around him, my tongue swirling over his ridges, lapping the way I did when I kissed him.

“Can you take me a little deeper?”

I nod, and he pushes further, until my gag reflex kicks in.

“Breathe slowly, baby. You can do this. I know you can.”

He grabs my hair tightly and tilts my head up, pushing in just a little further until I feel him at the back of my throat. He’s barely even halfway in, and I don’t think I can take much more.

I look into his eyes, taking in the pleasure and awe in them. It makes me feel so good and so powerful to know I’m doing this for him, that I’m providing the escape that he’s given me more often than he realizes.

I swallow around him, and he moans loudly. My eyes widen, worried the pilot or Maria might hear, but he doesn’t seem to care. He’s lost in me. “Can I move, baby? I need to fuck your mouth, Faye. I need you.”

I nod just a little, and he slowly begins to thrust, keeping my head still as I suck down on him, my tongue lapping at every part I can reach. Soft moans escape my lips, and his gaze becomes more heated. “You like that, huh? You like sucking your husband’s cock?”

I moan in reply, and he smirks at me, pleased. “My good girl,” he whispers. “Your mouth is so perfect, baby. You’re so good at this, so good at taking my cock.”

I squirm, heat pooling low in my belly at his words, and he chuckles darkly. “Is your pussy wet for me, Faye?”

My eyes widen, and he tightens his grip on my hair. “Slide your hand down your body and push your underwear aside,” he orders. I do as he asks, nervous and eager, a hint of shame making me hesitate. “Push your middle finger in, baby.”

I moan loudly, and he pushes deeper into my throat, thrusting gently, moving only an inch or so back and forth. He watches me as though I’m the most beautiful thing he’s ever seen, intense satisfaction simmering in his eyes.

“Give me those fingers,” he groans, reaching for my hand. He lifts it to his face, his eyes on mine as his mouth closes around my middle finger. I

watch him as he sucks it clean, and my pussy begins to throb just as turbulence shakes the plane again.

Dion tenses and grits his teeth, a hint of panic making its way into his eyes as he pulls out of my mouth. He stands there for a moment and runs a hand through his hair, looking more lost than I've ever seen him before.

"Take me," I plead. "Fuck me, Dion."

His attention refocuses on me, and he smirks as he pushes against my shoulder, making me fall back onto the bed. "There's nothing I want more," he murmurs as he lifts my hips and yanks my panties off, not bothering with the rest of our clothes as he climbs on top of me.

His fingers brush against my pussy, and he groans loudly when he realizes how wet I am. "Look at you," he moans. "Soaking wet for your husband. Did sucking my cock make you wet, angel?"

I nod, and he pushes against my entrance. "Of course it did, my *perfect* little wife." He stares into my eyes for a moment as the plane shakes, and then he pushes into me in one hard, deep stroke, drawing a loud moan from my throat. I'm almost embarrassed to admit it, but sucking him off pushed me all the way to the brink of an orgasm. I'm far closer than he realizes.

"You're so good at taking my cock," he murmurs, his hands pulling at my blouse. "I need to see you." I help him take off my blouse, and he moans when my bra comes undone. "*Fuck*."

His hands wrap around my hips and he lifts my lower body up with him as he rises to his knees, pulling me onto his cock deeper.

"Wrap your legs around me tightly," he orders. I do as he asked, and his eyes fall closed for a moment, his breathing ragged as he begins to undress. He watches me as he takes off his suit jacket and then his shirt, smirking when my eyes roam over his abs. "Like what you see?"

I blush scarlet when his shirt hits the floor, and his hands find their way back to my hips. There's something so captivating about the adoration in his eyes. His gaze roams over my bare breasts and the way my skirt is wrapped around my waist, and then he pulls out of me a little, his eyes moving to the apex of my thighs. He grins as he pushes back into me roughly, and I tighten my legs around his hips further, my inner muscles squeezing involuntarily. "Love watching my cock disappear in your tight, hungry pussy," he says, doing it again.

There's something so sexy about the way he moves, the way his suit pants are still wrapped around his thighs, as though he couldn't bear to

disconnect from me long enough to kick them off fully.

My muscles flutter around him again, and his eyes flash as lays me back down and moves on top of me. His hand moves to my thigh as he hitches it up, changing the angle he's taking me at.

"You make the whole world fade away, you know that?" he says as he begins to thrust harder, his movements swift and deep, filled with the same desperation I feel. "When I'm inside you, I feel complete. You were never supposed to make me feel this way, Faye. What the fuck have you done to me, hmm?"

"Dion," I moan, my fingers threading through his hair. He drops his forehead to mine as he continues to fuck me roughly, his hips rotating a little in a way that presses against a sensitive spot inside me. "I can't take it."

"You can," he growls. "You *will*." He fucks me harder, his hands roaming all over my body as though he can't get enough of me. "Take my cock like the good girl you are, Faye."

The plane begins to shake again, but his movements don't even falter. His eyes stay on mine, and he continues to drive into me like nothing matters more than I do. "Look at you, baby," he whispers. "I'm so proud of you. You're so good at taking my cock. *So good*."

I begin to pant, incoherent pleas escaping my lips, and he smirks, enjoying the way I'm falling apart for him. "You want to come for me, don't you?" he murmurs.

I nod. "Please," I moan. "I'm so close."

His hand moves between us, and he looks into my eyes as his thumb brushes over my clit. "Oh God, Dion," I moan. "*Yes*!"

"You sexy little thing. My perfect, *perfect* wife. Come for me, baby. I need to feel your pussy tighten around my cock."

And it does. It tightens for him, wave after wave of pleasure rocking my body. He groans and pulls back almost all the way before sheathing himself deep inside me, a satisfied moan filling my ears as he comes alongside me.

Dion collapses on top of me, and I wrap my arms around him, hugging him tightly while he presses soft lingering kisses to my neck. Turbulence hits the plane again, but he doesn't even tense this time, he just continues to kiss me.

One of my hands makes its way into his hair, my nails gently scraping his scalp as I massage him the way I did on the last flight we took together.

“I want to,” I whisper, more to myself than to him. “I want to let you in. I just don’t know how.”

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Chapter Thirty-Five

DION

I breathe a sigh of relief when the contracts are finally sighed, irritation running down my spine. Four days of nearly endless negotiations and barely being able to see my wife despite having her here with me, all because of Luca's expansion plans.

"We could've gotten the price down a little more," Maria says, sounding somewhat disgruntled.

I glance at her. "And it would've cost me an entire extra day to do that. It wasn't worth it."

She frowns as we walk out of one of our meeting rooms. I own the building, so we kept everything operational, but a lot of our key staff had to be moved. "That one extra day of negotiations could've saved us a few hundred thousand."

I shrug. "I don't lack money," I murmur, my tone irritable. The truth is that I want to spend some time with Faye and show her around the city I lived in for years. I don't care what it costs me.

She falls silent as she follows me into my office, and I turn to face her. She clearly has something to say to me, and I'd rather get it over with as soon as possible. Faye asked to see my London office, and I don't want her to arrive here only for me to still be working. I won't make her wait.

"You've been different lately," she says eventually. I raise my brows, unsure how to reply to that. "Your work is sloppier than usual, and you're

distracted. I'm worried about you, Dion. You don't seem like yourself."

I sigh, my irritation fading away. "Maria," I murmur. "I'm sorry you feel the quality of my work has gone down. I'll pay more attention and ensure none of our deals are affected."

She nods. "Is it her? I've never seen you act the way you do around her."

"Faye?" I correct, somehow irritated by the way she refers to my wife as *her*. "I suppose in some ways, yes. I've always thrown myself into my work because it was all I had, and that's no longer true."

She knows I had no intention of letting my marriage affect my life, so I can see why she might find it concerning to find me so enamored.

"I want to make things work with her," I finally admit, more to myself than to her. I know I'm not worthy, but maybe I can be, if I keep trying. I can tell that she and I are made of the same cloth, that we both seek something that we find in each other. Maybe I'll never be deserving of someone as wonderful as her, but fuck, I can *try*.

"I see," Maria says, her expression unreadable as she walks up to me. She grabs my tie and straightens it, seemingly lost in thought. "I just want you to be happy, Dion," she says eventually, her palm pressed against the silky fabric. "I could tell there's something between you… on the plane. It wasn't just lust. It was more than that. You sought her for comfort, and she provided it like she truly understood you."

Shame tears through me as I look at my secretary. I'd forgotten she was even there, and no doubt she must have heard us. "About that," I murmur. "It was not my intention to make you feel uncomfortable, but I'd understand if you no longer wish to fly with my wife and me. I would be happy to make alternative arrangements for you."

She pats my tie and shakes her head. "It's fine, Dion. That wasn't the point I was trying to make. I'm just worried you're mistaking your sense of loyalty and obligation for something else, especially because lust is clearly involved. I'm worried you'll settle for her and you'll both spend the rest of your lives wondering what could've been — or worse, you'll miss out on what *should've* been." She hesitates then. "But I hope I'm wrong, because you do seem calmer than you've ever been before. She seems to have a positive effect on you, even if it affects your work negatively."

I stare at her, taking in the genuine concern in her eyes, and my heart softens. "Maria—"

The door opens, and Faye walks in, only to freeze as her gaze lands on us, her eyes zeroing in on Maria's hand on my tie. Maria steps away immediately and excuses herself, but Faye doesn't move, not even once Maria closes the door behind her.

"Faye," I murmur, every instinct in my body telling me to be careful. She grits her teeth and lifts her face, hurt and betrayal flashing through her eyes. I tense and walk up to her, shaking my head. "Whatever is going on inside that pretty mind of yours, I can assure you it isn't true. She was just fixing my tie for me."

"*Why*?" she asks, her voice breaking.

I wrap my hands around her shoulders and smile down at my wife, a decidedly pleased but wicked feeling running down my spine. Fuck. I love it when she's jealous. It's so incredibly rare for her to act like my wife that I savor each instance.

"I'm not sure. I suppose it was crooked."

She stares at my tie in disgust and grabs it, her hands trembling slightly. She seems to hesitate before pulling it off altogether, her fingers curling around the fabric for a moment before she lets it fall to the floor. I try my best not to smile — I'm relatively certain that'll only make her more angry. "You don't need a tie," she says, her tone snappy. "Your workday is over now, anyway. There's no need to straighten it."

I bite my lip, intensely fucking pleased. "Look at me," I murmur. She lifts her gaze, a hint of uncertainty in her eyes, as though her own reaction surprised her. I love it when she loses that control she holds onto so tightly. Watching her mask crack is such a delight. "Tell me you didn't like her touching me, and it won't ever happen again. Just say the words, Faye."

Her lips part a little, and something I can't quite decipher flashes across her face. "I don't like it," she whispers. "I really don't like it when she's so close to you, Dion. I don't like that there's so much history between you two, and I don't like all the rumors surrounding you. I don't like any of it."

I smile then. I can't help it. "Good girl. Tell me what you want," I urge her. "You told me you wanted to let me in, so start by telling me that much." She never makes demands of me, but I want her to. I need her to learn that she can ask for whatever the fuck she wants, and the world will obey her. She's a Windsor now, *my wife*. I want her to start acting like it.

"I want you to draw better boundaries between the two of you," she says hesitantly, as though she isn't sure she should be admitting that. "I

don’t want her standing so close to you again, and she definitely has no business touching your tie like that.”

I nod, my heart pounding wildly. It took a few weeks, but she seems back to the woman she was in the days after our wedding. I haven’t figured out what happened while I was in Canada, but whatever it was seems behind us now. From the moment she kissed me on the plane, she’s been herself again. It’s surprising just how much I missed her.

“Done,” I say simply. She looks at me all doe-eyed, and I cup her cheek gently, pure fucking tenderness rushing through me. “Though I wish you hadn’t crumpled and thrown down my tie like that. I bought it because it’s the same color as your eyes — it’s my favorite.”

Her gaze darts to the floor. “Oh!” she says, her voice high-pitched. She moves to reach for it, but I pull her into me instead, my arms wrapping around her tightly.

“You can make up for it by letting me take you out for dinner,” I murmur. The last few weeks have been rough. She’s given herself to me fully in bed, but outside of it she’s been distant, going as far as devising obvious excuses not to spend time with me. It’s been near impossible to even get her to have dinner with me in our own home.

I’m done giving into fear. I want more of her. *All of her,* and I’m going to fight for it.

I’ll fight both her insecurities and mine, our shared past, and every obstacle we have yet to face. I’ll fight for just one single chance at happiness with her… because I think she might want it too.

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Chapter Thirty-Six

DION

I hold Faye's hand in mine as we walk into the restaurant I booked for us. "It's beautiful, but it's so empty," she murmurs, confused. "This place is supposed to be famous. I saw it in all the articles about top things to do here."

I don't bother telling her I booked this entire restaurant out for tonight. She'd likely feel overwhelmed by it, and it's not my intention to highlight how much money is now at her disposal, not when she isn't quite comfortable with it yet. All I want is some privacy with my wife, and we've got it now.

"Mr. and Mrs. Windsor," the chef greets as soon as we're seated, his tone eager but respectful as he talks us through the bespoke menu he created for tonight. Faye seems engrossed in the details of every dish, and I simply sit back to watch her. When did being with her stop filling me with guilt? It must've been when I realized that the same darkness consumes us both, yet when I'm buried inside her, it can't touch either of us. Each time I'm the one that brings the light back to her eyes, a little more of my guilt eases.

I thank the sommelier as he pours both of us a glass of wine, and the moment we're left alone, I lift it to hers. "To us," I murmur.

She taps her glass against mine, and my heart begins to pound wildly. Yeah, I really do want it all with her. I'm falling, aren't I? I never meant for

it to happen, but she owns me. Perhaps it was when I first kissed her in Hawaii, or maybe it was when I danced with her and made her laugh. Maybe it was far earlier than that, when I found her trembling in my arms, on the verge of a panic attack. I don't know when, and I don't know how, but she took what's left of me.

"I want more," I murmur, the words leaving my lips without thinking.

Faye's brows rise, and she smiles. "More of what?"

"You."

Her eyes widen a fraction, and a beautiful blush stains her cheeks. "Oh," she breathes. "I… I'm not sure what you…"

"Let's start with moving beyond small talk," I propose. "I'd really like you to stop being so careful around me. It's like you're only truly honest with me when we're in bed, Faye."

Her cheeks become redder still, and she glances around to ensure our conversation is still private. I find even those furtive glances of hers cute as hell. I'm fucked.

"Now, don't get me wrong. I love fucking you, my darling wife. I love making you come on my cock, and fuck, I love the taste of you. But it isn't enough. I want you outside of bed, too." I want to be able to ask her what's wrong and receive an honest answer. When she has a tough day, I want to be the one she turns to, and not just because she needs an escape, but simply because I'm *her person*. "Tell me, do you want the same? Is that what you meant when you said you wanted to let me in?"

She lifts her glass to her lips and takes a sip, considering my words. "Yes," she answers, her voice soft.

"Then let's start by having conversations that are deeper than surface level. Each time I try, you brush me off with an excuse or an answer that sounds awfully well-practiced. I just want you, Faye. You don't have to pretend in my presence — the only version of you I want is the *real* you."

"Dion," she murmurs, her voice breaking. "What if I don't know which version of me is real?"

I smile at her, knowing all too well how she feels. "Then give me all of you, every last jagged fractured piece. Give me all of it, Faye, because those pieces you think are broken? They complete me."

I reach for her and grab her hand, lifting it to my lips. She stares at me with such hope, and it lights something inside me that I thought I'd lost. "Tell me you want to try," I murmur, my voice soft. "With me."

She smiles then, and it's one of those smiles that makes my heart beat outside my chest. I breathe a sigh of relief and gently kiss her knuckles when she says, "*I do*. I want to try with you."

I entwine our fingers across the table as our server brings us our appetizers, the atmosphere entirely changed. The distance that's always been so clear is notably absent now, and I can't help but relax into my seat. It's been so long since my thoughts stilled the way they have tonight, and it's all because of her.

She smiles at me, a hint of anxiety in her eyes. Sometimes it hurts to look at her purely because I recognize so much of myself in her, and the things that hide inside me should never have found their way into those beautiful blues.

"Let me start with a simple question, then," I murmur, and she nods. "How did you start playing the piano? You're one of the youngest concert pianist in the country, and it's an impressive feat, but I realize I know nothing about the origins of your career. Was it because of your mother?"

Our mothers were both renowned pianists, so it seems likely that Faye's mom would've wanted her to follow in her footsteps. It's what Mom always wanted for me, too.

My wife blanches, and I frown when I notice the way her hand trembles as she reaches for her glass. "Dion," she says, shaking her head.

"Try, baby," I plead. It's such a simple question, but admittedly, there's more to it. I want to know why she played until she bled. Her piano seems to be a source of both comfort and pain, and I want to understand why. Is it because her wounds are similar to mine?

Faye's expression shutters closed, her gaze once more becoming unreadable. "It was because of you," she says, her tone calm, even. "The only reason I'm a concert pianist is because of *you*. My father forced me to learn from the moment he found out about our future marriage. I was *three*. I had to learn because at that time, it still seemed like you would've followed in your mother's footsteps. When it became clear that you wouldn't, my father had already realized I'd inherited my mom's talent, and he kept me in classes because he felt being a skilled pianist was a trait your family would appreciate. If nothing else, it'd be something we'd have in common and could talk about or bond over." She grimaces then. "You say you discuss subjects beyond small talk? Pick any topic. Anything at all. My

entire life was crafted to benefit and complement yours, so if you had an interest in it, so did I.”

I stare at her in shock. What? What the fuck? Faye’s expression morphs from resentment into horror, and she lifts her hand to her lips, as though she realized she said something she shouldn’t have. “I… I’m sorry,” she stammers. “I didn’t… that’s…”

I think back to our past, and everything slowly clicks together. Of course. While my family allowed me to run away from this marriage for years, hers trained her to become the perfect Windsor wife. My grandmother simply wanted to honor the promise our mothers made, but for Faye’s family, a lot more was at stake. The amount of money involved would’ve been life changing. Quite literally.

I feel sick to my stomach as I think back to everything I know about Faye. I’d felt guilty because of everything I took from her, not realizing it was far more than I ever could’ve comprehended. What right do I have to sit across from her now, asking for even more?

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Chapter Thirty-Seven

DION

Faye's head snaps up in surprise when I walk into the house, her gaze lowering seconds after her eyes meet mine. I swallow down the rush of guilt that threatens to overwhelm me and take a step forward, my hand wrapping around her waist. I pull her closer, taking in the dress and heels she's wearing, clearly ready to leave the house. "Where are you going?" I murmur, confused.

It's been a few days of stilted conversations that are painful for both of us, but there's no way I'm giving up so easily. Considering what she told me, chances are high that I'll have to let her go once our three years are up, but until then, she's mine. I'll use every second I've been granted to convince her to stay. I may have stolen away much of her childhood and most of her choices, but I can't return the time that is lost. What I *can* do is ensure that once our time is up, she'll still choose me.

"My father's house," she says, her voice trembling. She hasn't looked me in the eye for more than a handful of seconds in so long, and fuck, I miss her. It's odd to have her so close when there's so much distance between us. It's obvious she regrets saying what she did, and each of my attempts to discuss it has only driven us further apart.

"I'll come with you."

She looks at me then, a hint of panic in her eyes. "Oh, no. That's not necessary. Lauren made you dinner."

I tighten my grip on her waist and take in her expression. This is the Faye I used to know, and it's odd, because the girl staring back at me isn't my wife. "I'll come with you," I repeat.

She nods and slips out of my hold as she walks out the door, but I notice the way she trembles. Is she reacting this way because she doesn't want me near her? Asking my wife questions she doesn't want to answer sends her into a panic, and I hate seeing her that way, but fuck, I need her to talk to me. I've never done anything that should cause her to fear me, yet there are moments when she clearly does. I've never felt so at a loss. I'm a *Windsor*. There isn't much I can't have, yet my wife's thoughts and feelings are decidedly out of reach.

Faye is silent as I drive us to her father's home, and I'm not sure what to say either. Each step we try to take toward each other only tears us further apart.

"H-he isn't expecting you," she stammers as I park in front of her father's house. "I should've called."

Her hand is clammy and cold in mine as we walk up to the front door, and I glance down at her. "I'm your husband," I remind her. "Surely it doesn't matter if I join for dinner?"

She looks up at me with a hint of frustration, as though I couldn't possibly understand, and I'm starting to feel like that's true — but I'm also starting to see that the missing puzzle pieces that complete the picture I've glimpsed are all here, in this house, and she doesn't want me anywhere near it.

Her father's gaze snaps up when we walk into the dining room, and his stern expression melts into the polite and pleasant one he reserves for me. I take him in, the graying hair, that calculating look in his eyes, and the tight smile he forces onto his face. I never thought much of him — he was always my grandmother's problem. I wanted nothing to do with Faye or him, and that's where I went wrong.

"Dion," he greets instantly, ignoring his daughter. "Faye didn't tell me you'd be joining us." The look he throws her raises my hackles, and she tightens her grip on my hand, shifting her body just a fraction, leaning into me. I wrap my arm around her and lock my jaw.

"My wife wasn't aware I'd be joining until she was ready to leave the house. I apologize for intruding. If you'd like us to leave, we can."

Faye's body begins to shake, her gaze trained on the floor, and my own anger begins to rise. How the fuck did I miss this? Every question she refused to answer about her upbringing, the fear in her eyes when I asked if her father knew about Eric, and even the emotional wreckage I found after my trip to Canada. There's one commonality. Jimmy Matthews. He's the only person she'd seen other than our housekeeper and driver. I dismissed him too easily, having forgotten that not every father is like mine.

"No, of course you're welcome. If I'd known, I'd have prepared a nicer dinner. This is, after all, the first time Faye has brought you home." I nod as Jimmy shows me to my seat and pull Faye along with me. "Go help your sister and Abigail in the kitchen and inform them we have a guest," he says, his tone firm. "I'd like to talk business with Dion."

I frown and refuse to let go of Faye's hand. "My wife doesn't lift a finger in our own home — I'll be damned if I let her lift one in yours," I tell him, before raising our joined hands to my lips to kiss the back of her hand, my gaze unwavering.

His eyes flash with something I can't quite decipher — interest laced with irritation, if I were to make a guess. Faye sits down next to me, and I place my hand on her thigh as her father instantly begins to talk about his mining business, and the additional mine he'd like to invest in.

"Perhaps a joint venture would be of interest," he says, his tone eager. "I know the Windsors prefer to keep things in the family, so I thought I'd bring this to you first."

He says it like he's doing me a favor, when in reality, he's asking me for money. I tighten my grip on Faye's thigh and lift my head to look at him. "Your daughter hasn't spoken a single word since we walked in here. Did you notice that?"

He blinks in surprise, and Faye turns to look at me. I glance at her, my heart sinking when I find hints of panic interlaced with silent pleas. I was hoping I'd been wrong, that my imagination had been overactive, but there's no mistaking her expression. She's scared.

"Faye is always quiet," her father says, his tone irritable. "She was raised properly and rarely speaks out of turn."

For a moment, I wonder whether I could crack this marble dining table if I crush his head into it, but then Faye's stepmother and sister walk in, and I check my impulses.

They both look surprised to find me here and instantly paste smiles onto their faces as they greet me, their movements quick as they put down the dinner dishes. They both make polite conversation, enquiring after my family and my work, but all I can focus on is my wife. Not a single word has left her lips, and no one seems to notice.

“Faye,” Jimmy says eventually, as though he’s finally becoming aware of my rising anger.

Her back straightens, and she nods demurely. “Yes, Father?” There’s a slight tremble in her voice, a hint of deference that I thoroughly dislike.

“How is your piano practice going? I understand you were away for several days? I hope you aren’t neglecting your work. You have a concert in a week.”

She hesitates for a moment, that same blank look I used to hate drowning out her beautiful blues. “Practice is going well,” she answers calmly. “I am certain the concert will go as expected.”

Her father looks pleased, but there’s something more to it. Another puzzle piece falls into place, and my stomach recoils as her voice resounds through my mind. *My father forced me to learn from the moment he found out about our future marriage. I was three.*

“Just how much do you make per concert, darling?” I murmur, looking at Faye.

Her father goes rigid. “Oh, I’m not sure,” she murmurs. “It isn’t much, though.” She stares down at her plate, and I start to feel sick.

“You’re a concert pianist of the highest caliber. Each concert you play should earn you at least a hundred thousand, and you’ve been playing twice a month ever since we got married.”

Her head snaps up, and she stares at me in confusion. “No,” she begins to say, and my blood runs cold. “It definitely isn’t that much. I’m really not good enough for an amount like that.”

I tear my gaze off her and take in Jimmy’s shaken expression. “I take it you’re managing my wife’s money?” He nods reluctantly. “I’ll send you my bank details. You’ll deposit everything she’s earned from the moment we got married into that account. I’ll send over an independent auditor to verify her earnings tomorrow.”

“I’m sure that’s not necessary,” he begins to say, his gaze trained on his daughter. “Is it, Faye?”

She begins to shake, and I wrap my arm around her. “As you said, my wife rarely speaks out of turn. She wasn’t raised to disobey her husband.” But she’ll learn, sooner or later. She’ll learn that she can do and have whatever the fuck she wants, regardless of what I say. “You’ll deposit the money before noon tomorrow, or I’ll pick you up and drive you to The Windsor Bank myself.”

That vacant look in her eyes makes sense now, and I have no idea how to undo years of damage. He’s been controlling her for the money we promised him and the huge sums she’s unknowingly earned herself, and I’m not sure how easy it will be to cut the strings he’s holding.

But fuck, I’ll try.

There’s no fucking way anyone in this world will ever get to control my wife. Not even me.

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Chapter Thirty-Eight

FAYE

With each heartbeat, my fear rises until it becomes a tangible entity that permeates the air. I can taste it on the tip of my tongue and try my hardest to swallow it down, to no avail.

"Faye?"

I lift my head to find Dion staring at me, his gaze as unreadable as it used to be years ago. He stares at me, his gaze searching, and I'm terrified of what he might find. Shame unfurls in my stomach until it invades every inch of my body. If he were to find out how weak I truly am, he'd never look at me the same.

"Won't you show me to your room?"

I nod absentmindedly and I lead him up the stairs, my heart beating in my throat. Father asked him to stay for a drink after dinner, and I can't help but fear what might happen. The way Dion spoke to him earlier would have infuriated him, and I suspect Father will attempt to do some damage control. He won't manage it, though, and once he realizes that, it'll be Abigail and Chloe that'll pay for it. Likely the very second we leave this house.

My bedroom door closes behind me, the familiar room filling me with nothing but cold distaste. These four walls provided relative safety for years, but they always felt like a prison. They still do.

“I wondered about this the last time I was here, when I picked you up for our trip to Hawaii. How come there are no photos or mementos of any kind in your room? I’m surprised you don’t have a photo of your mother, at the very least.”

My eyes widen as a wave of fresh pain rolls over me. “I… I just like a minimalistic style.”

He walks up to me, forcing me to take a step back, but that doesn’t deter him. He simply grins as he corners me, my back against the wall and his hand cupping my cheek. His touch is always so gentle, so reverent. I’ve never been touched with such care in this house, and it undoes me. It makes me want to spill every secret in hopes he’ll save me, but this is no fairytale, and I’m no Cinderella.

“Is that why we have ornate doorknobs and detailed cushions in our house?” he asks, his eyes twinkling. “It certainly explains the perfectly matching shades of gold throughout our home, and the beautiful recurring patterns you chose.”

I part my lips to refute his words, only to find that I can’t. My lies don’t hold up in the face of a man that knows me better than I ever thought he could.

“You said you’d try, Faye… so try for me, baby. Nothing you could say would ever make me turn away from you, nor will I repay your honesty with lies. I’ll readily admit it was hard to hear that I unknowingly but profoundly impacted your upbringing, but don’t you see it doesn’t change a thing? The past is what it is, unchangeable, irreversible. Despite it, here we stand, you and I. I just want to get to know you better, angel.”

I look into his eyes, taking in his sincerity and his pleas. The very same man my father caters to stands before me looking utterly powerless, and somehow, it grants me the courage I need.

“I used to have one,” I murmur, my voice barely above a whisper. “A photo of my mom and me.”

“Yeah?” he encourages, his thumb brushing over the edge of my lip as he leans in closer.

“It was taken at an amusement park, and I was wearing a cute, silly strawberry hat. She had me in her arms, and we were both smiling so brightly that just looking at that photo brought me a bittersweet kind of joy. I was grinning up at the camera, but Mom? She was staring down at *me*. She had the biggest smile on her face, like I was a miracle to her.”

“What happened to the photo?” he asks, his fingers pushing through my hair possessively.

“Abigail didn’t like it. She hated having a photo of my mother in the house, so one day, after she and my father had an argument, he stormed into my room and destroyed the photo. I used to have a necklace that belonged to her too. It was a golden locket that she’d been wearing in that photo, and he took that as well. It’s the last thing I had of hers, and I never saw it again. He didn’t want to leave any reminders that would upset Abigail.”

He clenches his jaw for a moment, and I tense. “What kind of woman would begrudge a child memories of her mother?” he asks, his voice weighed down by anger.

I shake my head and force a smile. “I’m sure there was more to it. Abigail isn’t… she’s always been good to me. She’s the only mother I’ve ever really known, and I never felt like she treated me differently from the girls. If she did, it was more because I was the eldest.”

He shakes his head and sighs. “What about your father?” he asks, his tone cautious. “Was he good to you?”

I nod instantly, a shiver running down my spine. “Of course. He’s strict, as I’m sure you know, but he’s always been a good father to me.” The words tumble out of my mouth without thinking, fueled by fear. I’m terrified of what Dion might do if he found out the truth. He’d try to protect me, but in doing so, he’d condemn Chloe, Linda, and Abigail.

“You’re nervous,” he whispers. “Why?”

My breathing accelerates a notch, and I force a smile. “I just… it’s the first time I brought you home, and the atmosphere was a bit tense.”

He stares at me, his expression grim, a hint of disappointment swimming in his eyes, as though he knows I’m lying to him. “Were you truly unaware of how much you’re likely earning?”

I nod hesitantly, unsure how to explain. I know I should tell him not to push my father, and that I don’t mind him managing my money, but the words won’t leave my lips.

If what Dion is saying is true, then I’d have been earning well over a million dollars a year — for *years* now. I always believed that money would save us, but what if we’ve had it all along?

It pains me to even consider that scenario. Everything was supposed to get better once I got married, but my father hasn’t changed. If we didn’t

need the money at all, why was I still married off to Dion? Why didn't it make a difference?

With each passing day, the remnants of hope I held onto dissipate, leaving me increasingly disconsolate. I don't know how to save the girls, and I'm not sure I can have the future Dion is offering me when the past keeps dragging me back into the pits of despair.

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Chapter Thirty-Nine

FAYE

I never thought teaching could bring me as much joy as it does, but it's rapidly become one of my favorite activities of the week. The time I spend at The Windsor Staccato Foundation is far more fulfilling than anything else I've ever done, and through it, I've finally begun to understand why Tara Windsor and Mom refused to take on apprentices or students of any kind outside of it.

I finally see why Dion so carefully maintained our mothers' foundation, their legacy. What I have yet to understand is why he'd entrust me with something so precious, when I have no experience running a foundation this large. The faith he places in me will never cease to amaze me. It makes me wonder if I could trust him in return — with the secrets I keep, the pain I've never voiced.

It's all I can think about on the way home. *Try for me, baby.* He has no idea how badly I want to, but how do I tell the man I'm falling for that I've been tasked with ensnaring him? How do I explain that I spent years resenting him for influencing every aspect of my life, only to find that he's nothing like the person I built him up to be in my mind? How do I reconcile the part of me that longs to be free of him with the part that wants nothing but him?

"Faye."

I look up in surprise and find Dion sitting on our sofa, his legs parted and an incredible three-piece suit covering all my favorite parts of him. He looks relaxed and somewhat dazed, and I belatedly notice the whiskey glass balanced on his knee.

"Come here, my darling wife."

I catch it then, the unfocused look in his eyes, the slight slurring of his words. Fear runs down my spine as I take a step forward, experience having taught me not to hesitate. It isn't until I'm standing in front of him that I remember this is *Dion*, and he won't hurt me the way my father does when he drinks. *He won't.*

"I hate it when you look at me that way, you know?" He takes another sip of his whiskey and puts the glass away, the sound of it hitting our coffee table loud in the quiet space. "That's how you used to look at me when you were younger, as though merely being in my presence hurt you. It's one of the reasons I couldn't bear to be near you. Some days, it's still hard to be around you, knowing that your fears aren't unfounded."

He reaches for me and pulls me into his lap, his arms encircling me instantly. "You have no idea how selfish I am," he whispers, his gaze settling on my lips. "I know what you want, and I'll never give it to you. I will never let you go."

I inhale sharply when his hand threads through my hair, his grip tight, desperate. My own hands grip his waistcoat, and he draws a shaky breath. "Dion," I murmur, my tone soothing. "You have no idea what I want."

"This," he murmurs, his gaze heated. "This thing between us, it keeps me hooked, keeps me coming back for more. I'm enchanted, you know?"

I relax into his embrace, my fears entirely gone, vindication taking its place. I'd known he wouldn't hurt me, but it feels amazing to be proven right.

"You aren't enchanted, you're drunk." I smile at him, and his eyes widen.

"Wow," he whispers. "*Wow*. That's my *wife*."

I giggle. I can't help it. He makes me feel unlike myself. When I'm with him, I feel safe, cherished, and *powerful* beyond words. He's one of the richest and most influential men in the world, yet he never acts like it around me. He's never once made me feel inferior or small. When I married him, I thought I'd be falling into the hands of someone just like my father, but instead, I'm sitting in the lap of a man that thinks my smile lights up the

world. He's so close to tearing down the walls I spent years building, and he has no idea how badly I want to help him knock down what's left of it.

"Your wife would like to know why you're drunk at four in the afternoon on a Thursday when you were still supposed to be at work."

He tightens his grip on me and leans forward, swiping something off our coffee table. "Because of *this*."

My eyes widen in disbelief, and my hands tremble as I take the photograph from him. It isn't the exact same photograph — this one is better. Instead of looking at the mini-me in her arms, Mom is staring straight into the camera, her smile as bright as I remember it.

"Worth it," Dion whispers, as though he didn't mean to say the words out loud.

My gaze snaps up to his, my heart beating wildly. "How do you have this?"

He sighs and tightens his grip on me. "That day, at the amusement park? I was there too, baby. My entire family and yours went together."

He reaches for another photo then, and I stare at it wide-eyed. "It's… *us*."

Dion chuckles, the sound laced with a hint of pain. His hand roams over my body restlessly as he nods. "Yeah. Even then, you were absolutely enamored with me, you know?"

I smirk as I hold up the photo. "Dion, in this photo you're holding me in your arms, and *you're* looking at *me* like I'm the cutest thing you've ever seen."

"You were. You *are*. I was twelve there, and you were two. All of my siblings were jealous of me because you wouldn't go anywhere near any of them. I was the only one you liked, the only one that was ever allowed to hold you. I'd forgotten about that, you know? I was your favorite."

"You still are," I whisper, wishing I could remember the story he's telling me. Rationally, I knew that there would be stories of our moms together, since they were best friends, but hearing them is something else altogether. For years, Mom was someone no one acknowledged, someone that everyone in my house wanted to erase from existence even more than death already had. When I lost that photo of her, it felt like I lost the very last piece of her that existed, and it killed me.

As time passed, I began to forget her face and her smile, and with it, *she* faded away. I was so young that I didn't have any real memories of her.

That one photo was all I had.

“Yeah?” he asks, an odd hint of insecurity in his tone. “Show me, Faye. Prove to me I’m still your favorite.”

I carefully place the photos on the sofa beside us, my gaze darting toward the albums scattered on our coffee table. I’d been so focused on Dion that I hadn’t noticed it straight away, but now curiosity eats at me. Despite that, I turn toward my husband and wrap my arms around his neck.

The past can wait, because he’s right. Nothing will ever change it.

The future, though? If we want it to be, it could be ours.

I lean in and brush my lips against his, my touch tender. He sighs and buries his hands in my hair, his eyes falling closed as he deepens our kiss. He’s so careful with me, so gentle. He treats me like I’m breakable, not realizing each of his touches only reinforces me.

Just a little more. I’ll lean on him a little more until I’m strong enough to stand by his side.

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Chapter Forty

FAYE

I stare at Dion's suitcase by the door in dismay, personally offended by its presence. He chuckles and reaches for me, his hands cupping my face tightly. "Don't look so peeved, baby. How am I supposed to leave when your eyes are begging me to stay?"

I glance up at him and throw him a glare. "Just count your blessings that my mouth hasn't joined in on the begging. We both know you wouldn't be able to say no if I asked you to stay."

Dion bursts out laughing, and I stare at him in awe. He's never been so relaxed around me, and I've never felt quite this close to him before — not outside of bed. When he gave me that photograph of my mother a week ago, everything changed. I began to do what he asked me to. I began to *try*, in earnest. No more facades, no more holding back my words or feelings.

"Shall I just stay?" he asks. "Lex really doesn't need another manufacturing plant. And if he does, he should just buy it domestically and keep me out of it."

I shake my head when I realize he's serious. "You can't," I murmur. He knows as well as I do that none of the Windsors can buy any foreign assets without his signature. He'll have to go, and I can't come with him because of my upcoming concert. If I could've canceled it, I would have. Just the thought of everything I'd do to distract him on the plane has my lips turning

down in disappointment. “It’s only a weekend, anyway. I’m sure we’ll survive,” I murmur, my tone placating.

“I don’t think I will,” he says, his hands wrapping around my waist. He lifts me up and against the wall, his lips finding mine. “I hate flying without you, but not as much as I hate sleeping without you.”

I wrap my legs around his hips and lose myself in our kiss, my hands roaming over his body eagerly. Dion groans when my nails scrape over his scalp, and his hand slips underneath my dress. “I need you,” he pleads. “I have to hear you moan my name just one more time. This morning wasn’t enough, Faye. Give me just one more.”

I nod, my heart pounding wildly as liquid heat gathers between my legs. He pushes my panties aside seconds before our doorbell rings, both of us freezing. Dion drops his forehead to mine and takes a shaky breath before gently lowering me to the floor. “Who the fuck could that be?” he mutters.

My stomach twists as dread washes over me. My father hasn’t contacted me once since Dion and I went over for dinner, but there’s no escaping him. It’s one of the reasons I’ve been dreading my concert this weekend. Each time I see him, he destroys my confidence and tears down everything Dion and I have built. Just seeing him reminds me that I’m deceiving Dion, and that this fantasy we’re choosing to escape into isn’t real.

Sooner or later, Father will dig his claws back into me. Could he have known that Dion should’ve left for the airport already, and that I’d be alone? A small part of me is expecting him to show up here at some point. If anything, I’m surprised it’s taken him so long.

My entire body is tense when Dion pulls the front door open. Mere moments later, relief rushes through me despite Dion’s thoroughly unamused expression, his gaze on Sierra, Raven, and Valentina.

“Oh,” Sierra says, looking equally dismayed. “Why are you still here?”

He sighs and steps aside to let them in, an apologetic look in his eyes when he glances at me. I simply smirk back at him, letting him know I’m completely fine with our unexpected guests. He has no idea how grateful I am that it’s them and not my father. If I told him that, how would he respond? When he realizes how weak I am, will the way he looks at me change?

“I should probably head out,” Dion says, turning back to me and ignoring the girls entirely. He doesn’t even give them a chance to greet me as he bends down, his lips finding mine. He takes his time kissing me,

ignoring the giggles filling our hallway, and I can't help but give into his demands. My hands find their way into his hair, almost involuntarily, and he sighs, his forehead dropping to mine. "Be good for me while I'm away, okay?"

I nod and rise to my tiptoes, pressing another swift, chaste kiss to his lips before pulling away. "Always," I promise.

Dion looks reluctant as he steps back and reaches for his suitcase. He throws the girls a warning look before walking out, pausing in the doorway to glance back at me. "I'll see you in two days, angel. Break a leg at your concert, okay?"

I nod, and the door falls closed behind him. It's only two days, yet I miss him already. I'm aware of how ridiculous that is, but I can't help it.

"Did not see that coming," Sierra says, her arms looping through mine as she drags me back into the house.

"Me neither," Valentina says, soft laughter escaping her lips. "Dion is smitten."

Raven nods. "I told you, and you wouldn't believe me."

I'm so flustered that I have no idea what to say to their teasing. Smitten… I'm not sure if he is, but I have enough faith in us to know that there definitely is something between us now that neither of us expected to have.

"I thought you were joking when you told me this house was a masterpiece," Valentina says, her shoulder bumping against Raven's.

Sierra pauses abruptly in the living room, her eyes settling on the piano. She looks stricken, and I place my hand on her arm to steady her. "Are you okay?" I ask, concerned.

She turns to look at me, wide-eyed. "Faye," she says, her voice trembling. "Tell me how that piano made its way into your living room."

"I… well, your grandmother had it delivered when I was decorating the house. She told me it was one of Dion's most beloved possessions, so I had it restored for him and put it in the living room. I know it's his, but I'm the only one who really uses it."

Sierra stares at me, a hint of confusion in her gaze. "Dion lets you touch it?" she asks, her voice trembling.

I frown at her, trying to decipher her tone. "Of course," I murmur, confused. "I'm a pianist," I add dumbly, mildly offended.

“Has Dion… has he ever said anything to you about it?” Sierra asks, her voice soft. “About the piano, or even just the sound of it?”

I frown at her odd question. He did say something that stuck with me the very first time he heard me play it, but I’m not sure it’d be appropriate to repeat that. “He once said something along the lines of how he’d soon associate the sound of it with me. Why do you ask? Is something wrong?”

“Faye,” Valentina says, her voice soft. “This piano was made for Tara Windsor. While it’s true she left it to Dion, there’s a reason he let it fall into disrepair. He can’t stand the sound of the piano without thinking of his mother, and this piano specifically… the only times Dion can even bear to look at it is when he’s drunk. He’s never been able to let go of his parents, and he’s never truly grieved them. Instead, he’s always avoided every mention of them. If he’s finally allowing parts of them back into his life, then that is a good thing.”

What? Dread settles in the pit of my stomach as I see the piano in a different light, and my heart wrenches painfully. Have I unknowingly been forcing Dion to lay eyes on something that hurts him, something he wanted hidden away and forgotten? Why would he let me?

Sierra gently touches the golden Windsor logo on the piano, and Raven steps in beside her, her arm wrapping around her best friend. “I should’ve told you about the piano,” Raven says to Sierra. “I saw it last time, but I didn’t connect the dots.”

Sierra shakes her head and turns to look at me. “The fact that it’s here, that Dion lets you play it without so much as a hint of protest… you have no idea how much that means to all of us, Faye,” Sierra says. “You might not realize it, but you’re doing what none of us have been able to do. You’re helping him move on.”

I think back to the haunted look in his eyes the first few times he heard me play, and the way he’d distract me from it by touching me. These days, he seems content to lean back and watch me play, but that wasn’t always the case. I just didn’t recognize his behavior for what it was.

“Have I been hurting him?” I ask, my voice breaking. When I asked him why he’d gotten so drunk last week, he wouldn’t answer me, but it makes sense now. It must have killed him to search through photos of his parents, just to find one of my mom for me.

Worth it, he’d said when he saw me smile. At the time, I hadn’t realized what it had cost him to give me back those memories.

“No,” Raven says. “You’ve been *healing* him.” She smiles at me with such genuine gratitude that I relax just a fraction. “Dion won’t talk about this, but trust me when I say this is a huge leap forward for him.”

Raven grabs Sierra’s hand and gently leads her to the sofa, her gaze dropping to the old photo albums I left scattered all over. They both smile then, but it doesn’t quite reach their eyes. Sierra picks up one of my favorite photos, one of Dion and me as kids, and holds it to her chest for a moment. “You have no idea what you’ve done for him, do you? The man that opened the door today was the brother I thought I’d lost, and you returned him to me, to us. I owe you everything, and you don’t even realize it.”

I shake my head as I join the girls on the sofa. “Whatever you think I’ve done for him, I can assure you he’s done more for me,” I tell her, my voice soft.

She nods at me in gratitude as her gaze roams over the photos on the coffee table. I selected my favorites and had planned to put them up around the house, but maybe that’s not a good idea after all. It hurts to realize that I can’t read Dion as well as I thought I could. If I’d so much as suspected that looking at these photos hurt him, I’d have hidden them away.

“I remember this,” Sierra says as she picks up a photo where she’s seated on a swing, and Dion is pushing her. She looks at me then. “I know you think you don’t owe me anything, but I beg to differ, and I know exactly how to repay you.”

She holds up another photo then, one where Dion is wearing lipstick, and Sierra is holding up a makeup set. “The three of us know so many embarrassing stories about Dion that you definitely want to hear.”

I smile and nod at her in gratitude. I’m eager for more of my husband — I want to know everything about him, especially the past that haunts him. I want to know what he used to love, what made him smile. There are so many things he won’t tell me, and because of it, I’ve unknowingly been hurting him.

Val chuckles and reaches for her handbag. “I definitely know a few interesting facts about him that I can be convinced to spill after a few shots,” she says, holding up a bottle of tequila. “They aren’t from his childhood, but I assure you you’ll enjoy them.”

Raven grins then, an indulgent look in her eyes. “For example, do you know what Dion’s favorite color is?” she asks as she reaches into the pocket of her jacket and pulls out shot glasses with the words *Windsor Girls Anti-*

Poker Night on them. They're all personalized with names engraved on them, and it looks like I get one of my own. Intriguing. They definitely came prepared, but I'm not entirely sure what for. What is *anti-poker night*?

I nod. "Of course. It's blue."

Sierra and Raven share a conspiratorial look and simultaneously burst out laughing. "So, hear me out," Raven says as Val begins to pour shots, and Sierra opens a Tupperware box she brought filled with lime slices. "His favorite color right until my wedding day was green. A few days later, he shows up at my studio, telling me he wants a few ties and cufflinks in a very specific kind of blue. He spent an hour rejecting everything I offered him, and let me tell you, Dion doesn't do that. He's the most easygoing of all of us, so I was seriously confused. It made no sense at all. In the end, I had to custom mix colors for him and order him bespoke pieces. I spent months trying to figure out what was wrong with him, and in the end, it was Val who noticed it."

Valentina laughs, her arm wrapping around me as she leans into me, her eyes on mine. "It's so obvious, in hindsight," she says, before bursting into laughter all over again.

Sierra shakes her head. "His new favorite color is the exact shade of your eyes," she says, a teasing smirk on her lips.

The girls all burst into fits of laughter while I sit back on the sofa, dazed and flustered, my heart pounding wildly as I remember what he told me when I threw his tie on the floor in his London office.

I do wish you hadn't crumpled and thrown down my tie like that. I bought it because it's the same color as your eyes — it's my favorite.

Have I truly been missing all the signs he's been giving me? Raven's wedding was two years ago… back then he and I weren't on good terms yet, but I remember that night vividly, because it was the first time he danced with me more than once. Even that would've been a small sign he was no longer doing the bare minimum. The first dance would've been an obligation, but the second and third ones were choices.

I bite my lip, eager to trust his actions. I learned long ago that a man's actions weigh heavier than his words, yet somehow, I seem to have been missing everything he's been saying.

Each step he's taken toward me has been a hushed confession, an unspoken desire. In that regard, he and I are far more similar than I realized. We're both too scared of rejection, of destroying the rocky foundation we

built. Regardless, it’s time I start meeting him halfway. I wasn’t ready before, but I am now.

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Chapter Forty-One

DION

My body is taut with lingering tension from the flight as I quietly slip into the concert hall, the sounds of Faye's performance the only thing disturbing the silence. The crowd is enraptured, and so am I.

I lean back against the wall, my heart racing as I stare at her, the spotlight illuminating her graceful form. She's in a beautiful long gown tonight, and fuck, it's insane that she's my *wife*.

Just catching a glimpse of her is worth the lack of sleep and that truly dreadful turbulent flight. Thoughts of her carried me through, all the way into this venue.

She begins to play Debussy's *Rêverie, L. 68*, and it truly sounds magical. There's something about the way she plays that's just unlike anything I've ever experienced before. The only person who ever made me feel this in tune with music was my mother.

I smile to myself then, the memory of her bringing joy instead of pain for the first time in years. What would Mom say if she knew I flew back in a rush just to catch the tail end of my wife's performance? She'd be proud, I'm sure. Dad would be too. He firmly believed that a man should put his wife and family first, above business, above profit, above anything and everything else.

My gaze wanders over the crowd with a hint of pride, only to settle on a familiar face. My blood runs cold at the sight of Eric. What the fuck is he

doing here? Did she ask him to come here, knowing I'd be away? I bought this concert hall straight after that dinner at her house and expressly barred her father from so much as stepping foot into this place, hoping it'd prevent whatever it was that sent her spiraling when I went to Canada, but it looks like my darling wife took the opportunity to betray the vows she made.

I watch as she rises and bows to the audience, her gaze searching — for him, no doubt. She disappears behind the curtains, and I push off the wall, anger thrumming through my veins as I make my way backstage.

Faye looks up sharply when I walk into her dressing room, her face buried in the big bouquet of red roses that's been placed on her vanity. The sight of it chills me to the bone, a white-hot kind of fury overtaking my senses.

"Dion!" she says, clearly shocked to find me here. While I pushed myself to get back to her as soon as I could, she'd been counting on my absence. I walk up to her and stare at her bouquet, my fingers trailing over the top of them, until I find a card hidden in between two flowers.

I haven't stopped waiting. I never will.

– Eric.

I hold it up wordlessly, and her eyes widen as she steps away from her vanity and toward me. "I thought… I thought you sent them," she says, her tone cautious, worried. She's making excuses. Faye places her hands against my chest and looks up at me, her gaze pleading. "It isn't what you think, Dion. I promise you, I had no idea they weren't from you. I didn't even look for a card."

I reach for her and gently grab her chin, my eyes on hers, searching, waiting for a hint of the proof I'm after. "I would never send you red roses," I tell her, my tone harsh. I've hated them ever since I saw them cover my parents' caskets.

"Dion," she pleads, a hint of desperation in her gaze.

I shake my head and cut her off. “I warned you,” I murmur, my hand slipping into her hair. “The day after we got married, I told you exactly what I’d do to you if I ever found you so much as dreaming of him, yet here you are, smiling into a bouquet *he* gave you. Did you think I was joking? Have I been too kind to you?”

“The only one I dream of is you,” she professes. “Only you, Dion.” My beautiful wife is wearing that expression I love, the one that tells me she’d do anything to please me, to take away my anger.

“Get on your fucking knees,” I whisper.

She looks into my eyes, her own gaze searching, though I’m uncertain what for. Whatever she finds makes her sink down to the floor slowly with an unexpected kind of confidence, her gaze unwavering.

“Take out my cock, Faye.”

Her breathing rapidly accelerates as she undoes my suit button in the middle of her dressing room, her tongue darting out to lick her lips as she frees my cock. She looks up at me for a moment, a hint of a smile dancing on her lips. Does she think this is funny? “You warned me that you’d fuck my face if I so much of dreamt of him, didn’t you?” she asks, before slowly licking my cock from the tip to the base, her eyes never leaving mine. *Fuck*. “Is that what you want, Dion?”

I bury my hands in her hair and grip tightly as she takes the tip into her mouth, her tongue swirling around it and hitting every sensitive spot she can find. Goddamn. Who the fuck is getting punished here, because it sure as fuck doesn’t seem to be her.

“*Suck*,” I order, pushing deeper into her. She takes me eagerly and obeys, her mouth tightening around me. “Good fucking girl,” I moan as she begins to move her head properly. The way she’s looking up at me, pure desire dancing in her deep blues… fucking unreal. Faye moans on my cock and takes me deeper, angling her head just right for me to slip in all the way to the back of her throat. “Look at the way you’re taking your husband’s cock like the good girl you are,” I murmur, my anger draining away more with each swipe of her tongue. “You fucking love this, don’t you?”

She hums in affirmation and begins to suck me off in earnest, her movements eager, lust rapidly overtaking her expression. The sight of my wife on her knees and her mouth wrapped around my cock fucking undoes me.

I hold her hair and begin to thrust into her mouth, my movements increasingly erratic as she makes me lose control. She's far too fucking good at this, and she doesn't in the slightest look like she's being punished. Fuck, she looks like she knows exactly who is in control here, and we're both acutely aware it isn't me. "You're so good at letting me fuck your face," I groan as I slip deeper into her throat, holding still for a moment to make sure she's fine. She swallows around me in response, and I nearly fucking come right there and then. The amused look in her eyes tells me she knows it, and then she does it again.

"You fucking tease," I groan, tightening my hold on her hair. I grit my teeth and begin to fuck her throat properly, keeping her head still as I use her mouth as I please, and she lets me. "You keep swallowing like that and I'll come down your throat, Faye. You're playing with fire."

She does it again, and the combination of her eager tongue and her tight throat would've sent me over the edge if her dressing room door hadn't opened right at that moment.

She freezes but doesn't pull away when I let go of her hair, shock cutting through the haze of lust. I thought he'd come, but I was hoping he wouldn't. I was hoping I was wrong. "Don't stop," I beg my wife, desperate. It isn't sexual satisfaction I'm after — it's something deeper and far darker, and she reads my needs with ease.

Faye sucks down on my cock harder, a knowing look in her eyes. It feels like the biggest fucking victory to know she's placing me above everything else, including her own pride. She must suspect who just entered her dressing room, yet she continues to give me what I asked her for. If I hadn't already fallen for her, I would have now.

"My wife is too occupied to speak to you, Eric," I murmur, my gaze lifting to his stricken face. Eric looks fucking devastated, and I smile, knowing he'll never be able to forget the image I'm presenting him with.

Faye falters for a moment at the sound of his name, but then she takes me in deeper and swallows hard, repeatedly. Fucking hell. Does she want me to come with her ex watching us? There's no mistaking her eagerness, and I grin when Eric just stares at the back of her head in disbelief, most of her face hidden from where he's standing.

I glance back down at my wife, a wave of emotion crashing through me. I didn't need to say a word for her to recognize and tame my demons, because she and I are one and the same.

“You’re so perfect,” I tell her, unable to help myself as I pull back a little, only to slide deeper into her throat. “I’m so fucking crazy about you, Faye. The way you take my cock without a care for who might be watching, and the way you put me first. I…” *I fucking love you. I love you.*

I look up at Eric, overcome with emotions I don’t want him to witness. “Get the fuck out,” I snap. I wanted him to know that she’s mine, and I wanted to sever any lingering bonds between them, but I’ve done that now. “My wife deserves one hell of a reward for her performance, and I don’t want you here to witness it. I don’t give a fuck if you want to see my cock, Eric, but you aren’t seeing a single inch of my wife’s skin.”

He stumbles back, looking entirely disillusioned and so fucking heartbroken that I’d feel sorry for him if it wasn’t my wife he coveted. The door falls closed, and I pull out of Faye’s mouth, my cock hard and throbbing.

“*No*,” she pleads, her voice tainted with desire. “I want you to come for me, Dion. Please. I need you to give it to me.”

Her mouth latches onto me, and she easily takes it, until she’s got the entire head of my cock in her throat. “Baby, I can’t,” I tell her. “I can’t take it, Faye. I’m too close.”

She looks up at me as though she’s as desperate and needy as I am, as though she truly needs me to come for her. “Fuck,” I groan, my hands finding their way into her hair again. “I’m so fucking obsessed with you,” I murmur as I begin to rock my hips. “You’re such a good girl, aren’t you?” She moans, pleased with my praise, and I smile down at her. “My perfect, *perfect* wife.” She swallows then, and that’s all it takes for me to come down her throat. She takes every last drop, intense fucking pleasure flickering through her eyes as I pull out of her, unsteady on my feet.

“I’m going to bring those goddamn roses home,” I tell her, my voice trembling, “tear them up and spread the petals on our bed, and then I’m going to fuck you until you’re screaming for mercy.”

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Chapter Forty-Two

FAYE

Dion parks in front of the house, his hands gripping the steering wheel tightly. He's staring straight ahead, the tension in the air palpable. "I'm so fucking sorry, Faye," he murmurs.

I turn toward my husband, my gaze searching. "For what?" I ask, my voice soft. "For keeping a promise?"

He looks down, clearly unable to face me, and I think I understand why. "For enacting a threat that I never should've made in the first place."

He runs a hand over his face and takes a shaky breath. "I know you love him. I shouldn't have… *fuck*. I don't deserve to claim you the way I did. I don't even deserve to touch you, yet I still knowingly destroyed every last hope he had."

He looks so remorseful, and it kills me. "I don't love him, Dion," I whisper. "I don't think I ever did." It's something I've barely even admitted to myself, but I know he needs to hear it. "Being with him was an act of defiance, a desperate attempt to regain some control in a life I had no say over. It wasn't about love — it was about *freedom*."

He looks at me then, a flicker of hope lighting in his gaze. I smile as I reach for him, the tips of my fingers brushing over his temple. "If I didn't *want* to get on my knees for you, I wouldn't have, and you would *not* have made me. Being able to put your worries to rest like that made me feel *incredible*."

Dion just stares at me, as though he can't quite figure me out. There's a hint of fear in his gaze, and I'm surprised I never recognized it before. If not for everything the girls told me, I may not have realized that I'm not the only one with impenetrable defenses. He's as scared as I am.

"Come on," I murmur as I undo my seatbelt. "Let's go home. You made me another promise that I expect you to keep."

I grab the bouquet Eric gave me from the backseat before heading toward the front door, my steps slow and my heart racing. When I finally hear Dion's footsteps behind me, I exhale in relief, a smile making its way onto my lips.

"Faye," he calls, but I don't turn back. Instead, I head straight for our bedroom, knowing he'll follow me. He pauses in the doorway, and I turn toward him as I destroy the first rose, letting the petals fall onto our bed. "Stop," he urges, his voice rough.

I grin and shake my head. "I don't want to." I shrug as another rose is reduced to petals, and he takes a hesitant step toward me. "It took me far too long to realize it, but from the moment we got married, you've been catering to me, showing me this flawless version of you, almost like you're trying to make up for the years of neglect and rejection."

I see it now — he acts *remorseful* around me. The evidence is in the way he treats me with just a bit too much care, like I'm breakable. It's in the way he quietly suffers as he watches me play his mother's piano in his own home, and the way he searched through old photo albums for me when it clearly tore him up to do so. He acts like he deserves to suffer, when he's just as trapped in this marriage as I am. He didn't have a choice either.

I destroy another rose and watch the petals flutter to our bed, and he takes another hesitant step toward me. "That's not the version of you I want, Dion," I murmur, looking back at him.

Hope mixes with sheer reverence in his eyes, and it emboldens me. I take a deep breath and lay my soul bare. "I want the parts of you that you wish would never see the light of day. Dion, I want the man that promised me he'd fuck me on top of these rose petals. You don't need to pretend with me, you know? I can tell you're holding back, and I don't want you to. I just want *you*."

He pauses in front of me, seeming uncertain. "You don't," he whispers, as though he's begging me to prove him wrong. "Baby, if you saw the darkness that hides inside me, you'd run. Rightfully so."

I place my hands against his waistcoat and stare up at him. “So show me, Dion. Give me what no one else in my life ever has — give me a choice. Show me the worst parts of you and let me decide if I can live with what I find.”

His hand curls around my cheek, his eyes blazing. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you. I can keep up this act until we’re gray and old, Faye. For you, I would.”

I smile up at him and shake my head. “I want all of you,” I whisper, pleading, begging. I don’t want him to treat me like I’m made of glass, like he has to hide parts of himself around me. “I can take it, Dion. You told me you wanted to try with me, right? So *try*.”

His gaze roams over my face, as though he’s assessing the truthfulness of my words. He sighs and sits down on our bed. “You want the real me, Faye? You want the truth?” He smiles then, but it doesn’t quite reach his eyes. “I’m fucking furious he was at your concert at all, and though you did good sucking my cock like I told you to, it wasn’t enough. I don’t give a fuck whether or not you were expecting him — the fact that he was there means you haven’t properly put him in his place, and that’s fucking unacceptable. You are *mine*. You wear my ring and carry my surname, but you still don’t realize who the fuck you belong to. I should’ve broken his fucking fingers to ensure he’d never lay a hand on you again. Next time, I will. You want the real me, baby? If he comes near you again, I won’t stop until he’s begging for his fucking life. I’ll make you watch as he bleeds out at your feet.”

I stare at him, a thrill running down my spine. Dion unbridled is a sight to behold. Perhaps his words should scare me, but they don’t. If anything, I just want to push him further. I want to see him lose control, just to prove to myself that he’d never hurt *me*, even if he’s more than prepared to hurt others. “Understood,” I murmur, my eyes on his.

He looks at me as though he expected more of a reaction and narrows his eyes. “I don’t think you understand at all, sweetheart,” he says, his eyes trailing over the gown I’m wearing, untamed fury blazing through his eyes. “But you will, Faye. It’s about time I make sure you’ll *never* forget whose wife you are.” His eyes flash dangerously, and he locks his jaw. “Take off that dress.”

I do as he asks instantly, desire rushing through me as the fabric hits the floor, leaving me standing in front of him in nothing but a pair of high

heels. I've been wet since we left my dressing room, and I suspect he knows it.

Dion's eyes widen when he realizes I'm naked under the tight gown I was wearing, and something that looks an awful lot like insecurity flashes through his eyes. "I couldn't wear anything underneath without the lines showing through my gown," I rush to tell him, desperate to reassure him.

He hums, as though he isn't sure he believes me. "Come here."

I step in between his legs, and he looks up at me, his expression hard as he cups my pussy, the heel of his hand pushing against my clit before he pulls his hand up, coating his fingers in wetness. "Did making your ex watch as you sucked your husband's cock get you this wet?"

He slips two fingers into me, and I moan. "*Yes*, it did."

His eyes flash with satisfaction. "Good girl," he murmurs. "See? You do know how to be good sometimes. If only you'd been good for me the whole time, Faye." His thumb flicks over my clit as he pumps his fingers into me, bringing me to the edge swiftly, only to pull his fingers away. I whimper in disappointment as he brings his fingers to his lips. "You see… only good girls get to come. Filthy little sluts like you? You just get used for my pleasure. You'll please me, won't you?"

"I'll do anything for you," I tell him, my words far more sincere than he realizes.

"Good girl," he praises, satisfied with my answer. "Now turn around, spread your legs, and bend over. Place your hands on your ankles for me."

My heart pounds wildly as I do as he asked, exposing myself to him in the most vulnerable way I ever have.

"Such a pretty pussy," he murmurs, leaning in. The feel of his breath on my skin makes my muscles contract, my entire body tense with anticipation. Dion drags his tongue over my clit, and I moan loudly, eager for more, but he pulls away and chuckles right before slapping my pussy, *hard*. I gasp, a new rush of desire concentrating between my legs. "You want my tongue, huh? What makes you think you deserve it?"

"Please," I moan, desperate.

He leans in and places his lips on the apex of my thigh, right below the curve of my ass. A low, strained sound escapes the back of my throat when he sucks down, clearly marking me as his. "Mine," he growls, before moving his lips an inch and doing it all over again. His fingers find their

way back into me, and he begins to pump slowly, stroking my G-spot with every move, teasing, punishing.

"Please, Dion," I beg when he pulls away just as he gets me back to the edge. I'm desperate to come, but he won't let me. He just continues to mark my skin, his movements leisurely.

"You sound so sexy when you beg, baby. No one but me will ever taste this delicious pussy. It's mine. You are mine. Say it."

His tongue drags over my clit, and my muscles begin to contract, but he pulls away before I can come. "I'm yours," I moan. "Only yours."

His hands begin to knead my ass, and he chuckles. "Damn right you are." He squeezes hard, and then he pulls his hand away, only to bring it down on my skin harshly, the sound of his palm hitting my skin loud in our quiet bedroom.

Pain spreads across my ass, and for a moment I consider shouting *Yellow*, but then the pain fades, leaving only a delicious kind of heat in its place. A low moan escapes my lips when he gently traces his fingers over my burning skin. "That's for looking so goddamn beautiful that not a single man could keep their eyes off you at your concert," he murmurs, his tone carrying a hint of anger.

He caresses my ass and places a soft kiss on my unharmed cheek, only to bite down on it moments before a harsh slap lands on that too, no doubt making both sides equally red. "This is for the roses, though I'm pleased with the way you destroyed a few of them."

"Dion," I moan. "Oh *God*." I didn't think this is something I'd be into considering the harsh punishments my father always inflicted, but it feels so *good*. There's something so empowering about knowing that even his harshest punishments are designed to bring me pleasure. Despite his rough touch, I feel safe and cherished, and it makes me feel far more emotional than I thought it could.

Dion's tongue brushes over my thighs, inching close but not nearly close enough to where I want him. "You want all of me, baby?" he whispers, his breath dancing across my pussy. "I'll give you all of me." His tongue begins to lap around my clit, and then he sucks down on it, making it clear that he'd mark me there if he could. My moans get louder, my pleas incoherent, but he doesn't care. He doesn't relent until I'm at the brink of an orgasm, and then he pulls away abruptly, refusing to give me what I want.

"*No*," I sob, desperate. "*Please*."

He just chuckles, as though my frenzy amuses him. “Just be grateful I haven’t tied you up, wife. One day, I will. Piss me off again, and I’ll tie you to our bed and fuck you right to the brink of madness. Depending on my mood, I’ll either force you to come so many times that you’re begging for a reprieve, or I won’t let you come at all, keeping you at the edge until I give you *permission* to come.”

A thrill runs down my spine at the thought of it, and already, I’m thinking of ways to make him punish me like that. I don’t want him to be nice to me. I want him to treat me roughly and prove to me that no matter what I do, his worst will never truly hurt me. I want to push and prod until he shows me his demons, until he pushes me into that headspace where I can finally be myself — not the Windsor wife I was raised to be, not my father’s prim daughter. Just *his*. His everything.

In my peripheral vision, I see him grab one of Eric’s roses as I come down from the high he brought me to. He analyzes it, seemingly pleased with the way it’s still unopened. Before I realize what he intends to do with it, he’s got it pressed against my pussy, a low chuckle escaping his lips as he pushes it in.

“What would Eric say if he saw you right now, angel? Your pussy is swallowing one of the roses he bought for you *so beautifully*.” I moan, the soft feel of the flower only bringing a hint of relief. “I guess he did buy them for you to enjoy, and you’re definitely doing that, aren’t you?”

“*Dion*,” I moan, my tone a mixture of chastising and pleading. “I need you, *please*.”

He presses his finger against my clit as he begins to fuck me with the rose, his movements carefully controlled. “You don’t deserve my cock, but you’re taking your punishment so well that I might have to reconsider.”

“I need… I need to come,” I tell him, my breathing ragged. He doesn’t care — he just continues to tease until he’s successfully withheld another orgasm from me. Only then does he pull the rose away, letting it fall to our bedroom floor, another humorless laugh escaping his lips.

“You’re so desperate for my cock,” he murmurs, pleased. “Tell me, wife. Who does this pussy belong to?”

“*You*,” I reply instantly. “It belongs to you, Dion.”

He hums in approval. “I’m so proud of you, Faye. You’re doing so well, but surely you realize that you deserve to be punished for enchanting me? You make me want things I swear I’d never even dream of, and now I’ve

had a taste of you, I can never go back to my life before you. You've fucking *ruined* me."

I gasp as his hand comes down on my skin again, harder this time, the tips of his fingers slapping against my pussy, and it's exactly what I needed to push me over the edge. A loud moan escapes my lips as my entire body contracts, my knees giving in. My mind goes blank, and Dion catches me, holding me in his arms as the strongest and longest orgasm I've ever felt tears through my body, his name on my lips.

"I've got you, my love," he murmurs. He kisses my forehead as I tremble in his embrace, his touch so gentle that I'm on the brink of tears. I'm not sure why I'm so emotional today, but he just makes me feel so safe.

"You okay, baby?" he asks when my breathing evens out. I nod, and he nips at my earlobe. "Good, because I'm not done with you."

The moment my body stills, he turns me over and throws me onto our bed, his gaze burning with the same need I feel. "Tell me. Did I give you permission to come, Faye?" he asks, his voice rough.

I lie back and shake my head, my gaze eager as he unbuckles his belt. My pussy spasms in delight when he takes out his cock and I spread my legs for him eagerly, but he shakes his head.

"Only good girls get my cock, angel." He climbs onto our bed and kneels in between my legs as he strokes himself, his eyes on mine. I reach for him, but he throws me a chastising stare. "You want me to fuck you, huh?" he murmurs.

"I need it," I admit, my tone frantic. "I need to feel you inside me. *Please*."

He smiles at me, his lips parting as he gets closer. "You should've thought of that before you came without my permission."

His eyes fall closed as he comes all over my chest and stomach, the sound of his moans making me shiver in delight. He may not have been fucking me, but that was all for me. I know it.

Dion smirks as he looks down at me and grabs a handful of rose petals, a dangerous look in his eyes as he drops them on top of me. I watch him as he reaches for me and massages them into my skin until I'm a mess of rose petals and *him*.

Then he grabs his phone and takes a photo of me, legs spread, desire dancing in my eyes. "Beautiful," he whispers. "This," he says, turning his

phone toward me to show me the photo, “is going to accompany me on every trip I have to go on without you.”

He drops his phone to the bed and leans over me then, his lips finding mine. I breathe a sigh of relief when he finally kisses me, his touch gentle and caring, and so very much in contrast with his earlier roughness that it brings tears to my eyes all over again. He pulls back a little to look at me, his gaze dark. “I think I’m in love with you, Faye Windsor. If ever there was a chance I’d let you go, it’s gone now. You are *mine*, and you will be for the rest of your life. There’s no hiding from me. There’s no place you could go where I wouldn’t hunt you down.”

I smile at him, oddly pleased by his words. This is what I wanted — the real him, every last depraved inch of him. “I can live with that,” I murmur, answering his unspoken question. “Because I think I’m in love with you, too.”

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Chapter Forty-Three

DION

I wake up in bed alone, a stray rose petal on Faye's pillow bringing a hesitant smile to my face. She was fucking magnificent last night, but I struggle to suppress the hint of guilt I feel.

I've become so used to being alone and isolating myself, scared of what might be revealed if anyone got too close, so why does she make me show her my rough edges? Faye terrifies me, because she makes me wish for acceptance — the one thing I don't deserve. I want her to see the depth of my malice and choose me anyway. Last night, it seemed like she could, like she *does*.

I slip out of bed and follow the sounds of my mother's piano, the edges of my lips tugged up into a slight smile when I see Faye sitting behind it in nothing but my shirt. Her long hair falls down her body in waves, and I lean back to watch her, my heart overflowing with affection. She's playing a contemporary piece today, pausing every so often to write down the notes.

I push off the wall and walk up to her, oddly nervous. Last night was perfect, but a small part of me is still worried that I might have scared her, or worse, that I hurt her. I've always treated her so tenderly, and I'd hate for her to feel any less appreciated. I'm worried I fucked up.

Faye looks up at me and smiles, her eyes roaming over my bare upper body and pausing at the gray sweats I'm wearing. I fucking love the way

her eyes twinkle with appreciation, not a hint of shame or apprehension in her expression as she checks me out.

“Morning, darling,” I murmur as I reach for her, my mind made up. I can’t let this fear rule me forever. My wife gasps as I lift her off her seat and take her place before lowering her onto my lap, her back pressed to my chest. “Composing?”

“Yeah,” she whispers, relaxing against me. She drops her head back, and I lean in to kiss her neck, my hands wrapping around her. There’s no tension in her body at all, no lingering fear, like I thought there might be.

She exhales shakily as she places her hands back on the keys, her concentration clearly broken. I love the way she looks at me and truly sees me, the way she prioritizes me and drops everything else in my presence. I’ve never come first to anyone — not even my siblings. It’s something I didn’t realize I needed until her.

Faye groans when she can’t quite figure out the next notes, and I nuzzle her shoulder, simply enjoying being near her. There’s so much I need to review for work, even on a Sunday, but nothing could tear me away from my wife right now.

“Let me see,” I murmur, reaching for her sheet music. “Can you play it from the start?”

She does as I ask, and it strikes me then. This is the first time I’m sitting behind this piano completely sober, free of despair. Because of her.

I reach around her, my fingers ghosting over the ivories, trembling ever so slightly. I inhale deeply and turn my head toward her, my lips brushing over her ear. “How about this?”

Then I do what I haven’t done in years — I begin to compose alongside her, the rest of her piece playing in my head, my fingers eager to catch up but no longer skilled enough to.

Faye inhales sharply and places her hands between mine, a moment of hesitation in her demeanor before she swiftly turns her composition into a duet, playing alongside me. It’s… it’s fucking divine. With every chord we play together, a little more weight is lifted off my chest. That’s what she does to me. This feeling could never be described as mere love. It’s so much more than that. She is my salvation, my purpose. She is everything I didn’t think I wanted, and everything I denied I ever needed.

“Wow,” she whispers, once both our fingers still. I pull my hands away and wrap them around her waist as she tries her best to write down the pure

magic we both felt. She's shaking, as am I. "Dion, that was…"

I smile and press another kiss to her neck. "You seem to like contemporary pieces much more than classical. Why don't you try adding an original composition to your concerts?"

She stiffens and glances over her shoulder, as though I'm ludicrous. "I… I could never."

I wrap my arms around her and hug her tightly. "You can," I murmur. "You can do anything you want, Mrs. Windsor."

She pauses then, my words sinking in. How long will it take for her to act the way I want her to? It's odd, because I've always hated spoiled women, but that's exactly what I want to turn my wife into — a spoiled princess with the world at her feet.

She twists in my lap to look at me, a smile on her face. "You really mean that, don't you? If I wanted to start playing my own pieces, you'd really support me."

I nod, nonplussed. "Of course."

She shakes her head, happiness dancing in her eyes. I was worried I'd scared her away yesterday, but I should've known better. She truly is perfect for me.

"Dion," she says, her tone hesitant. "I meant what I said last night. I want all of you, even the parts you try to hide from me. It wasn't something I said in the heat of the moment, nor will I take back those words. I want you to let me in. Do you think you could?" She hesitates and reaches for me, the tips of her fingers ghosting over my temple. "Could we have a real marriage, if we try?"

My entire body tenses, and the look in her eyes tells me she knows I'm about to turn away from her, but she won't let me. Faye's hand wraps around my cheek, and she keeps her eyes on mine. "I know what it's like to always have to showcase the best parts of you, and to fear what might happen if you let your fears show. But Dion, I also know how exhausting that is, and how much it wears you down. I think… maybe, you and I, maybe we could lean on each other."

I nod and wrap a hand into her hair, my forehead dropping to hers. "I want to, Faye. I'm trying. The idea of being happy with you no longer scares me as much as it used to, but it isn't easy."

There are things I've done that would make her hate me, fear me. How many people have I captured and tortured simply because they offended my

family? How many scalpels have I dulled? The worst part is that I have no intention of changing, yet I still desire her love. If I truly showed her all of me, would she still look at me with such sincerity and faith?

If one day, those beautiful blue eyes of hers direct contempt at me, I'm not sure I'd survive it. How do I take any more steps toward her when doing so almost inevitably leads to my ruin?

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Chapter Forty-Four

FAYE

I stare at the bank balance on my banking app in disbelief, a new kind of thrill running down my spine. The staggering amount is surprising, but I'm even more surprised that Dion gave it to *me*. He put the money in a brand-new account registered solely to me, instead of keeping and managing it himself. Sometimes, it's still hard to believe that he truly isn't like my father, and that some of the things that seem normal to me aren't healthy at all.

I've never had so much money at my disposal, and this little taste of freedom is addicting. I could do whatever I want with it. I could buy an outfit for my next concert without feeling guilty about spending Dion's money… or I could do something far more outrageous and buy a house of my own. A safe haven, a place only I know, somewhere I could go when I need to escape.

For a split second, I imagine a life of true freedom, one where I'm not bound to the Windsors. I'd dance in the rain and travel through Europe by train, playing each abandoned piano I find, everyone entirely unaware of who I am, and how much they'd have to pay to see me play in concert. I'd pursue every passion, every interest, and I wouldn't have to feel bad about it.

If I'd had this kind of money years ago, would I have run away? Unless Abigail came with me, I wouldn't have been able to take the girls until they

came of age, and I don't think I could've left them behind. I bite my lip as I lock my phone. Could I save them still?

I'm snapped out of my thoughts when the doorbell rings. Moments later, Lauren leads a limping Chloe into the living room, and just like that, all my daydreams fade to dust — obliterated by the reality I can't free her from.

"Chloe!"

She glares at me, and I freeze mid-step, confused by the venom she's directing at me. "Faye," she mutters, her expression conveying blame and condemnation.

My heart begins to beat out of my chest as guilt slowly seeps in, making my shoulders sag, my entire body responding to her silent accusations.

"You look great," she whispers, her voice breaking. "I missed you, you know? I doubt you feel the same."

"Of course I missed you too," I rush to tell her. "I've been calling and texting you every day, but you've been so short with me, and I wasn't sure what to do."

I reach for her, only for her to flinch in pain the moment my hands brush against her shoulders. Chloe stumbles back and locks her jaw, tears rapidly gathering in her dark eyes. "What happened?" I ask, fearing her answer.

She carefully pushes back her sleeves, revealing countless bruises, each one of them punishment meant for *me*.

"What did you think would happen when Dion demanded that Dad give you the concert money?" she murmurs. "Of course he'd never hand it over without a single hint of complaint. Just what did you think we'd been living off?"

The implication behind her words slowly diffuses the guilt that threatens to overwhelm me. "I was always told my concerts barely make enough to cover the production costs and my student debts." My voice is soft, a hint of disappointment ringing through despite my best attempts to suppress it.

Chloe's eyes widen, and she looks away, as though she's suddenly realizing she said something she shouldn't have.

Father spent years telling me I wasn't good enough to earn more than a basic salary, and that there wasn't anything left after all the costs we incur just to put on the shows. I had my doubts every once in a while, but I knew

better than to voice them. Chloe knew how much harm his words did, yet she hid the truth.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I ask, my voice barely above a whisper. “That amount of money could’ve changed everything for us — we could’ve been free from him, Chloe. We could’ve run, *together*.”

She looks disarmed for a moment, but then shakes her head and looks away. “It would have changed everything for *you*. I was happy at home, Faye. I didn’t want anything to change, and I definitely didn’t want to run away. Mom and Linda didn’t want to leave either. Your family is already broken, but ours isn’t.”

Her words cut deep, and I stumble back a step as I slowly digest her words, reading between the lines. She kept the truth from me because sustaining her lifestyle off my earnings was more important to her than my wellbeing. After all, Father never hurt her until recently. She essentially had it all at my expense. I’ve never seen her as anything but my sweet baby sister, but what am I to her?

“Dion may have ignored you in the past, but he clearly adores you now,” she tells me, her tone placating. “Why isn’t that enough? You don’t really need the money, do you? Not as much as we do.”

I stare at my little sister in disbelief. She wanted me to keep performing at an unsustainable level without earning a penny, because she benefitted from it. What hurts the most is that I would have.

“I didn’t ask Dion to interfere,” I tell her, my thoughts reeling. It’s almost like I can see the past through a different lens now, and it tainted the few precious memories I had. “You were there, Chloe. I didn’t say a word.”

“But you didn’t stop him either, nor did you drop by to see if we were okay when you knew how mad Dad would be. I barely replied to your text messages, and you didn’t care.”

Her voice is harsh, accusing, and normally it would have made me want to appease her. Today, her tone just further highlights her sense of entitlement. It’s odd that I never saw it before.

“I suppose in some ways, you left one controlling household to enter another, but at least Dion does it to protect you. He told us Windsor Tech makes all of your electronic devices, and he warned Dad against contacting you. He’s having all of your incoming communications monitored, so even if I wanted to say anything to you about the situation at home, I couldn’t.”

Shock renders me speechless for a moment, a hint of unease running down my spine. Dion can't be monitoring me to that extent. He wouldn't try to control me like my father did, would he?

"Dad even tried coming to your last concert to speak to you in person, but Dion bought the entire building and banned him from entering the premises. You can pretty much guess what happened next, can't you? He came home and tore into Mom, breaking several of her bones. *Because of you.* Please, Faye, can't you fix this? I just want things to go back to how they used to be, so please, just be the sister you've always been. Please, okay?"

My gaze roams over the girl I watched grow up, the one I'd have given the world for. I saw the signs, but I ignored every single one of them, because in that cold, lonely house, my sisters were all I had. I always knew I didn't belong with them, that I never quite fit in, but I never could've imagined they knew the extent of what I was going through and turned a blind eye. It wasn't just my father that was using me — it was all of them, and I'm not sure where that leaves me.

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Chapter Forty-Five

DION

I walk into the house to find Faye seated behind her piano, a soft melancholic melody filling the living room. I pause and stare at her, taking in the pain in her notes, as though her music isn't meant to be more than a whispered plea. It's something she wrote herself, no doubt.

I walk up to her and lean in, startling her as I lift her into my arms, her fingers yanked away from the keys unceremoniously. She gasps, but there isn't a hint of outrage or reluctance in her eyes — she just wraps her arms around my neck and brushes her nose against my throat as I carry her to the sofa.

"What happened?" I ask as I sit down and place her on my lap. She rests her head against my chest and wraps her hand around the side of my neck, seeking comfort.

Things have been near-perfect between us lately. Eric involuntarily brought us closer, and though I'd never admit it, I have him to thank for the way Faye is finally letting me in. Our evenings are spent talking about anything and everything, and she's no longer holding back. I've seen my wife come alive, and it's been a sight to behold.

It's also what makes it all the more confusing to find her so desolate tonight. I thought I'd taken care of anything that could upset or hurt her. Where did I go wrong?

“Dion,” she says, her face hidden against my neck. “Did you cut off my family’s access to me? Are you *monitoring* me?”

I push her upright and carefully study her downcast gaze. “Faye.” My voice falters in light of the betrayal in her tone. I gently place my index finger underneath her chin and lift her face up. “I was just trying to protect you.”

She looks at me then, mistrust in her beautiful blue eyes. “You were trying to control me, or you’d have discussed this with me first.”

I clench my jaw, unsure how to handle this situation. I’m so used to doing whatever the fuck I want with zero consequences I’m uncertain how to respond now. “I saw you at your father’s house. They all dismissed you like you were some kind of accessory, and your father was clearly using you, *embezzling* funds from you. You were a shell of the woman I know you to be, Faye. You’re right, of course. I should’ve spoken to you, but I don’t regret doing what I did. I’m not going to sit back while someone uses you. I don’t give a fuck if they’re your family.”

Her eyes flash with anger, and she pushes against my chest. “Don’t you see that you’ve only made things worse?”

I stare at her as hopelessness overtakes her expression. “What happened, Faye?” I ask, my stomach sinking.

Tears gather in her eyes, and she draws a shaky breath. “Dion,” she murmurs, her voice breaking. “I need… I need your help.” Her voice breaks on the last word, as though it pains her to have to ask, as though she doesn’t realize that I’d do anything for her.

“Tell me,” I murmur, trying my best to keep my tone even despite the unease running down my spine.

She chokes back a sob and nods, her eyes falling closed for a moment. “It’s my father. Do you remember that day at my house, after dinner? You asked if my father was good to me.”

I nod, my entire body tensing.

“I lied. But you knew that, didn’t you?”

I inhale deeply and nod again. “Yes,” I admit. “I’ve been investigating him for months now. It’s clear he tried to control you financially, and everything you told me about the way you were raised is in line with that motivation, but…” I pause, almost as though not saying the words would make them not true, like some kind of fucked up *Schrodinger’s cat* bullshit.

“I could never determine the extent of his behavior. What I found was enough to make me want to cut him out of your life the way I did.”

She looks into my eyes as a single tear trails down her cheek, it’s path one of destruction. There’s nothing I won’t do to take away the pain that drowns out her beautiful blues. “He wasn’t always like that, you know? When I was younger, he treated me with such care. I’m not sure if it’s me he loved, or if he just loved my potential, but by the end, it was definitely the latter.” She tucks a strand of hair behind her ear and draws a shaky breath. “At first, it wasn’t so bad. I was never given the same freedom as my two half-sisters, but I loved the piano, so I didn’t mind so much. It wasn’t until I was eight and told him I wanted to stop playing that he… that he first hit me.”

My stomach twists, and my blood rushes to my ears, making her words fade away for a moment. It takes all of me to keep my arms wrapped around my wife, to keep calm, when all I want to do is round up her asshole of a father and destroy him.

“I wasn’t allowed to quit, because he was so certain it would give me a way of bridging the distance you enforced. That’s when he was the worst, you know? Each time you were photographed with other women, or when you refused to see me despite being in the country, he’d punish me. He didn’t care that I was a teenager throughout most of your indiscretions, or that our engagement was nothing but a verbal agreement that had little to do with either of us personally. I suppose it wasn’t the insult that mattered — he was scared you’d walk away from the deal between our families, and he needed the money.”

She looks away and lets her eyes fall closed for a moment. “At first, he’d apologize profusely and tell me that disciplining me was part of his job, that he was doing it for me. Over time, he did away with the excuses. You have no idea how many times I considered running away, but he’d warned me if I tried, he’d take out his anger on my stepmom and sisters.”

Faye grits her teeth and looks down at her hands. “Do you have any idea how much it hurts to know that all I am is simply a product of your desires? I have no idea who I’d be if I hadn’t been engaged to you from birth. Would I even be a pianist? Would I have been allowed to make my own friends? Would I have gone to college, and if I did, what would I have chosen to study? I don’t know, Dion. I have no idea who I’d be if not for you, and I hated you for it. I didn’t think that would change, but you… you’ve got me

feeling so conflicted. You're nothing like what I was expecting, and for a while, I thought I was wrong about you. You made me believe that… that you wouldn't control me the way my father did."

I tighten my grip on her and shake my head. "Everything I've done is to protect you. I would never use you the way he did. Surely you see that?" I ask, my tone pleading. My attempts to protect her have only suffocated her, but there's no way to undo the decisions I've made.

She nods. "I do." Her voice is barely above a whisper. "I understand where you're coming from, Dion. But I… I just wish you'd asked me before doing anything at all. Because you refused to talk to me first, you condemned my sisters. Shortly before we got married, my father stopped hurting me — instead, he'd take his anger out on my little sister, and he'd make me watch, reminding me it wouldn't have happened if I'd just obeyed, if I'd tried harder at whatever it is he'd decided to be mad about. When you cut him off like that, you endangered my sisters' lives, and I didn't even realize it. The only reason I agreed to get married at all was so I could protect my sisters, and you took that from me. I… I don't know what to do."

She drops her forehead to my shoulder, and I embrace her tightly as she bursts into tears, pure heartbreak making her entire body shake in my hold. It fucking kills me to see her fall apart like this, even more so because I only have myself to blame for it.

Every bit of pain she experienced throughout the years was a direct result of my actions. Every single bit of harm that's come to her has been because of me.

"I can make him disappear."

She tenses and shakes her head. "I'd be no better than him if I hurt him, Dion. I don't want to become a monster like he is, and I don't want you to become one because of me either. Please don't stain your hands like that on my behalf. Promise me."

My wife pulls back a little to look into my eyes, and I nod reluctantly, unable to deny her. She studies me for a moment, before finally relaxing back into my embrace when she finds the reassurance she was looking for.

"I don't know what to do, Dion," she whispers, her breath caressing my neck, "but I do know I need help."

"You've got it," I promise. "You've got me."

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Chapter Forty-Six

DION

"He's being transferred to one of my building sites," Xavier tells me over the phone as I step into my car. "It's completely deserted at this time of night."

"I'll see you in twenty minutes then."

He hums in agreement. "I'm not sure why you asked me to capture your father-in-law, but since it's you, I'm certain he deserves it."

"He does," I tell him, feeling conflicted. Faye told me she didn't want to hurt him, because she's doesn't want to sink to his level, but fuck, I'm far below that already. If I see this through and she finds out, would I lose the trust she placed in me?

"Good, because I picked up all your favorite tools on the way. I'll have him tied up and ready for you."

I chuckle, I can't help it. Xavier is just as crazy as I am, and that kind of non-judgement is exactly what I need tonight. "Such a good friend."

Xavier laughs. "You owe me."

I shake my head as I drive through a restricted area, toward Xavier's half-built apartment complex. "Fucking Kingstons and your favors."

The funny part is he doesn't need any favors from me. Just as there's not much he won't do for me, it's the same on my part. If Xavier ever needs me, I'll be there. Especially after tonight.

I find him leaning on the hood of his Aston Martin, his phone pressed to his ear. He ends the call as I park next to him, an easy smile on his face. “You good?” he asks, his gaze roaming over my face. “You look far more… *conscientious* than usual. You sure you want to do this?”

I hesitate. I can’t let him get away with hurting my wife for years, but I’m not sure I could hide this from her for the rest of our lives. A secret that big can’t remain contained forever, and once it’s out, she’ll realize I’m just as much of a monster as her father. She thinks she knows who I am, but she hasn’t seen the extent of my cruelty — I don’t want her to.

“Yeah,” I murmur.

His gaze is searching, like he’s considering stopping me. “Dion,” he begins to say, only to straighten, his eyes moving past me. I turn around to find five supercars approaching us, shock coursing through me when they park in a single line, side by side, caging both Xavier and my own car in.

The doors open, and my brothers and Silas step out, their expressions grim. “Did you tell them?” I ask Xavier. He shakes his head, looking mildly impressed.

Zane pauses in front of me and crosses his arms, a chastising look in his eyes. “I’m offended you tried to hide this from us,” he tells me, his jaw locked.

Lexington nods and moves to stand next to Zane. “Offended isn’t the word I’d choose. More like fucking pissed off. Did you really think none of us realized what you’ve been up to on our behalf? The only reason we left you be was because we thought you needed it. We all felt that taking matters into your own hands the way you do would help you heal old wounds, but this? What the fuck is this? You need to learn to ask for help when you need it, Dion. We’re your *family*.”

Ares sighs and places his hand on my shoulder. “Did you truly believe I wouldn’t realize that Hannah popped up in the Kingston mansion as a maid, or that you were behind her finally losing all her financial backing?”

Luca throws me a knowing look. “And did you think I wouldn’t figure out who was behind Val’s father’s robbery? You beat him to near-death and threw his wallet in the garbage bin closest to him. It was obvious it wasn’t a robbery at all. It was revenge, and I’m grateful for it, because despite my wishes, I couldn’t have been the one to do it. I couldn’t have faced my wife if I had.”

Silas nods at my brothers before looking at me. “Which is why you’re going to stay out here while we handle Faye’s father. I’m well aware you were behind Mona’s sudden death. She died the same way my father did, albeit behind bars, and I know I owe you for it.”

Ares squeezes my shoulder and smiles. “Do you know why we allowed you to step in? Why we kept quiet? It’s because you did what none of us could. Now that you’re standing in our shoes, you finally get it, don’t you? If you go in there, you’ll never be able to look your wife in the eye without feeling immense guilt. You won’t be able to keep this from her, and that secret will fester. It’ll destroy your conscience. You can’t do something that might make Faye fear you, but *we* can.”

“You knew,” I murmur, shocked.

They glance at each other and chuckle. “Of course we knew. You did your best to keep your secrets, Dion, but come on. We’re Windsors, and we’ve been worried about you.”

I stare at them speechlessly, a knot unraveling in my chest. I can’t quite define the feeling, but it’s one I haven’t felt in years. *Reassurance. Loyalty. Gratitude.*

Zane hands me a remote while Lex hands me an earpiece. “I placed bombs in all of Jimmy’s mines. Silas ensured they’re empty. We might not have the full story, but we protect our own, Dion. We’ll make it so he’ll never recover.”

“Any special requests?” Luca asks as he picks up a crowbar from Xavier’s chest of tools.

I straighten my back and nod. “Beat him harshly,” I say through gritted teeth. “Break as many bones in his body as you can, and when he’s at his lowest, tell him about the bombs. I want him destroyed, both physically and financially.”

Zane’s expression flashes with comprehension, and one by one, my brothers follow. “That piece of shit,” Ares mutters, reaching for a set of brass knuckles.

“How fucking dare he touch one of our own,” Lex says, his body shaking with anger.

Xavier wraps an arm around my shoulder and nods reassuringly. “Stay here,” he says. “We’ve got this.”

I force a shaky smile onto my face. “I owe you.”

Xave shakes his head. “No. Not for this one.”

I lean back against my car as they all walk into one of Xavier's half-finished apartment blocks, disappearing from sight. I've been so desperate to make Faye rely on me, but all the while, I refused to acknowledge that I've been the same. I need to learn how to rely on others too. At the very least, I have to try. I can't ask something of her that I'm not willing to do myself.

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Chapter Forty-Seven

FAYE

Dion hasn't looked me in the eye all week, and I suspect I know why. One day after I admit to my father's years long abuse, he goes missing, only to re-emerge three days later in a hospital, fighting for his life? It wasn't hard to connect the dots.

He's quiet as he helps me into the car, and I try to think back to the last real conversation we had, but I come up empty.

"Dion," I murmur as he reaches over me to grab my seatbelt. "Was it you? There's no point in avoiding this conversation indefinitely, and I did ask for your help. I need to know if… is this my fault?"

He finally looks at me then, his expression disarmed. "No," he instantly denies. "It's not your fault. Not at all." His eyes meet mine, and all of a sudden, it feels like I can breathe again. I've missed this — seeing myself reflected in his deep green eyes.

Dion pulls a hand through his hair and sighs. "I didn't lay a hand on your father, Faye, but I can't deny that my family was involved. My brothers… you should understand that marrying me didn't just result in you having a husband. You also gained four big brothers and three relatively insane sisters. I… I was going to hurt him, but they found out and took over. You should know that if they hadn't, the outcome would've been the same — I don't want you to think I'm somehow less of a monster simply because I didn't bloody my hands this time. I won't deceive you like that.

There simply is no world in which I'd have let him get away with what he did to you unharmed."

I stare at him, taking in the conflict in his gaze, his tense posture. "Do you remember when I told you that I wanted all of you?"

He nods then.

"I meant it, Dion. If it had been you, I would've… I would have accepted that. When you told me that everything you do is to protect me, I wasn't in the right frame of mind to listen, but I hear you now. I might not be happy with the way you take matters into your own hands, but I trust you enough to believe you won't hurt or control me the way he did."

He stares at me with such deep need that I'm tempted to climb into his lap and reassure him. I recognize that look in his eyes, because I've seen it reflected back at me in the mirror for years. "Do you still want that, Faye?" he asks, his voice soft. "Now that I've fully removed your father's hold on you, do you still want me? Us?"

I nod and begin to answer, but he shakes his head and grabs my hand. "You've never had a choice when it came to me," he says. "You told me you have no idea who you would've become if not for me, and no matter how I think about it, you're right. You deserve to have a choice. You should think about what you'd do if you had one. In a world where you and I weren't engaged since we were kids, would you have chosen me?"

I tear my gaze away and shake my head. "It doesn't matter, Dion. Why ponder rhetorical questions?"

He lifts my hand to his lips and presses a soft kiss to my knuckles. It's the closest he's gotten to me all week, and it's ridiculous how it makes my heart race. "It does," he whispers. "It matters."

I watch him carefully as he drives me to my father's house, unable to read his mood. He's been different, cagey. The way he'll barely look at me reminds me of what he was like before we got married, back when I thought he saw me as an inconvenience. I realize now that it isn't reluctance. It's blatant guilt that he tries to hide behind a polite smile.

He doesn't say a word as we walk into the house, but when he notices the accusations in my stepmother's eyes, his hand securely wraps around my shoulder, silently telling me I'm not alone. She called me and asked me to come over, and I'd assumed it's because she'd wanted to tell me what happened to Father in person, but it looks like I was wrong.

“Faye,” Abigail says, leaning back on the sofa, her arms wrapped around the girls. They stare at me with red eyes filled with heartache, and for a moment, I waver. “How could you do this to your own father?”

I tense but force an innocent smile onto my lips. “I’m not sure what you’re talking about,” I lie. “I’m as shocked as you are. I suppose some of Father’s debts were due?”

Abigail’s eyes flash. “And whose fault is that? If you hadn’t taken away money that you don’t even need, he wouldn’t be in this situation.” Her gaze flickers to Dion, clearly uncertain how much more she can say in his presence.

I stare at her, wondering how I missed it for so long. She’s the only mother figure I’ve ever really known, and I was so desperate to belong that I turned a blind eye to her flaws. I’m as much a tool to her as I was to my father.

“I should’ve known when you refused to run with the girls and me instead of forcing me into marriage. Why would you? Until recently, he left your daughters unharmed. You must’ve genuinely believed that his anger would’ve tempered once I was married and out of his sight.”

Confusion flickers through her eyes, and I realize then that my response isn’t what she was expecting. I’ve never dealt well with the thought of disappointing her, so even a hint of a complaint from her always led to me apologizing and falling back in line.

“I loved you, you know? All of you. I realize now that the feeling was never quite mutual, but it’s true. For years, I had a bag packed, an escape plan in mind. I stayed because I loved you enough to spare you from what Father would’ve done to you if I’d disappeared.”

I was so deeply entrenched in their deception that I didn’t realize how they’ve all been manipulating me. They took my need to belong, to be *loved*, and they used it against me.

“I’m here to say goodbye,” I murmur, my voice breaking. “I’ll pay for Linda and Chloe’s college tuition, because despite everything, I want both of them to have a future, but that’s it. I’m done being your puppet. I gave you a chance to walk away from Father, from this home, but you chose to stay even if it meant sacrificing my happiness and freedom. You made your decision, and I’m finally ready to accept that.”

“Faye,” Chloe says, her tone cautious.

I take a step back and shake my head. “No,” I cut her off before the usual string of defenses and excuses leave her lips. “I’m done.”

“Faye!” Linda shouts, her tone desperate. “You’ll never get away with this. Make things right, and we’ll forgive you. We won’t say a thing about what you did to Dad. We can still be a family, you know? Don’t you want that?”

I grab Dion’s hand and entwine our fingers, my heart finally at ease as I lift our joint hands. “I do have a family, at last.” I feel his gaze on me as he lifts our hands to his lips and gently kisses my knuckles. “Besides, it sounds like you don’t quite realize who I am now. I’m Faye *Windsor*. I had nothing to do with Father’s accident, but it wouldn’t matter if I did. I could’ve stabbed him in the heart and twisted the knife, and there’s not a single thing you could’ve done about it.”

Dion chuckles, and I look up at him to find him staring at me with pure pride in his eyes. “That’s my girl,” he murmurs.

I grin at him, not an ounce of guilt or responsibility weighing me down for perhaps the first time in my life, and he smiles back at me. “Take me home.”

Home. It’s more than just four walls. It’s safety, comfort, and acceptance. It’s *him*.

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Chapter Forty-Eight

DION

I know I'm dreaming when I see my mother smile back at me, the two of us wandering through the fields near our holiday cabin. I've got her hand in mine, and she's so much smaller than I remember her being.

"She'll never forgive you, you know? You've done your best to ignore the past, and I commend you for it, but you can't outrun it. She'll find out that you killed her mother, and you'll lose her. But you already know that, don't you? A small part of yourself is prepared for it. Isn't that why you've been distancing yourself from her? You're a monster, Dion. You were then, and you haven't changed, have you? You've only gotten worse. If your brothers hadn't shown up, you'd have gone in there, and we both know you would not have stopped until you made Faye an orphan."

I stare at her, my heart sinking. "You know what's the worst part of these dreams? I now have more memories of this version of you than I do of the real you, and I can no longer tell what's real. Did you hate me then too? Do you truly blame me for what happened? Mom, do I truly deserve this?"

She's right, of course. I do want to escape the past. I wish I could wipe the slate clean and be the man Faye thinks I am, but that's impossible.

"You do," she says simply. "You heard her, didn't you? She wanted to run away from you. Do you really think that's changed? She's only staying because she thinks she owes you, because that's the kind of woman she is — she's responsible, and she'll repay her debts, no matter what it costs her.

She never chose you, Dion. She's just making the best of a terrible situation, and you know it. Faye will never love you. How can she, when you're her captor? You're no better than her father."

I let go of her hand and take a step away. "Stop it," I warn. "You don't know a thing about her, about us. I love her."

"Do you?" she murmurs. "Do you even know what true love is? Do you love her, or do you want to control and possess her? Someone like you isn't capable of love."

I take another step back, and she smiles at me tauntingly. "Go on," she murmurs. "Destroy her, the way you do everything else you touch. Just don't say I didn't warn you when you're left holding the ruins of everything she could've been."

"Dion!" I'm shaken out of my dream violently, Faye's worried gaze roaming over my face. "Oh God," she says, her arms wrapping around me. "I was so worried. You wouldn't wake up."

I blink a few times as reality edges into existence and hug her back. Sometime during the night, she climbed on top of me and pulled me upright, my clammy body pressed against hers.

"*Faye*." Her name is a prayer on my lips, a plea. I bury my face against her neck as my mother's words resound through my mind.

She pulls away a little to look at me, her hands on my shoulders. "What happened? What did you dream about? I've never seen you like that, Dion. You were thrashing in your sleep, begging for something and apologizing over and over again."

I was? I don't remember that part. With each second that passes, more of my dream fades away, but my mother's harsh warnings stay at the forefront of my mind.

"She's right," I murmur. "I'll lose you eventually, won't I? You'll never forgive me."

"Forgive you for what?" she asks, her tone hesitant.

I look into her stunning blue eyes, feeling more lost than ever before. Each time my demons come out to play, I'm tempted to let them drag me to hell. That's what a life without her would be — pure hell.

I'm at an impasse. My guilt is eating me alive, but part of me wants to put my faith in my wife. Perhaps my mother is right, but what if she isn't? What if Faye could love me despite everything?

"I'm the reason my parents and your mother are dead."

She freezes, her eyes widening a fraction. "Dion, they died in a plane crash," she says carefully.

I swallow hard and nod. "I know." Years of therapy have made it much easier to cope, to be rational about it, but I still firmly believe I'm at least partially to blame. "They wouldn't have been on that plane if not for me, Faye. They'd gone to London because they'd been in the process of expanding the Staccato Foundation, and their negotiations hadn't gone as smoothly as they expected." I draw a shaky breath and lean back against the headrest, my wife still securely in my lap. "I… I had a concert. It was my first big solo concert, and I begged my parents and your mom to come back for it. I told them I'd never forgive them if I had to walk onto that stage without them, and I accused them of caring more about the kids at the foundation than about me. We had a terrible fight that racked up a huge telephone bill. Your mom tried to appease me, but I wouldn't listen. She promised me she'd be at my next few performances, you know? Told me she wouldn't miss them for the world, that she'd bring you too, and that you'd cheer me on together. The last thing I told her was that I hated her and my parents."

She cups my face, forcing me to look at her. "Dion, you were *twelve*. Of course you wanted your parents with you for something so terrifying."

I wrap my hands around her waist and hold her tightly, my throat burning. "They flew back early to attend my concert, Faye. You lost your mother because of *me*. Do you see how different your life would've been if she'd been there? It's not just her you lost. I took away the childhood that rightfully should've been yours. I know that, and despite that, I still want more. I've taken so much from you, yet I still want your heart too."

I inhale shakily and tear my gaze away, unable to face her. "Dion," she whispers. "You've got it. My heart is yours. *I'm* yours."

I look back at her, disbelief rendering me speechless. The way she looks at me… it hasn't changed.

"Do you hear yourself, Dion? You were a child. You aren't to blame for what happened to my mother and your parents. *I* don't blame you. I understand the circumstances fueled your guilt, but my love, you didn't

cause that plane to crash. You, Dion Windsor, are powerful beyond measure — but you're not that powerful. You didn't do this."

She pulls me closer, her legs wrapping around me as she clings to me. Something unfurls in my chest, relief hitting me hard as I hug her back, my face buried in her neck.

"How long have you been carrying that guilt?" she asks, her voice breaking. "Is this why you were running away from me for so long?"

I bury a hand in her hair, my breathing shallow. "I was in therapy for years, Faye. Rationally, I know I didn't… I didn't kill them. But a small part of me continues to believe it, and I'd be lying if I said that wasn't the reason I couldn't face you. Logically, I understand I didn't cause their accident, but if not for me, they wouldn't have been on that plane."

"Is that what your dreams are about?" She moves back to look at me when I don't answer. "Dion, this isn't the first night that one of your nightmares woke me up. I've never said anything because it seemed deeply personal, and you've always fallen back asleep soon after, but it hasn't gone unnoticed. What do you dream of?"

I look into her eyes, hesitation making my words falter. "My mother," I say eventually, laying my cards on the table. "I dream of her telling me I'm a monster and that I killed her. It's the reason I can't let go. Each time I try, she appears, reminding me that I don't deserve to escape the guilt."

Faye's eyes fill with tears, and she shakes her head. "You do," she urges. "You deserve to be free of guilt, and you deserve to be happy, Dion."

"You wouldn't say that if you knew what I've done. I hear you, baby. I was a child when my parents died, but everything since then? My hands aren't clean, and no matter what I do, I can't erase the stains on them."

She smiles at me then, a hint of amusement in her eyes. "My darling husband," she murmurs, and my heart skips a beat. "You're a Windsor. Name one powerful man with a clear conscience, one man who won't break the law and his own morals to protect his own."

I fall silent, and she shakes her head. "When I married you, I thought you *were* a monster, Dion. I thought you were just like my father, that you'd hurt me until I was completely broken and molded into what you wanted me to be. I couldn't have been more wrong. You built me up, supported me unconditionally, and you've protected me in a way I never would've expected of you. If you tore anything down at all, it's the walls I built. I

love you, Dion. All of you, even the parts you think are unworthy. Will you let me? Will you let me love you, Dion?”

I swallow down the lump in my throat and reach for her, my lips brushing against her cautiously, almost as though a part of me still isn’t sure of what I heard. Her hands wrap into my hair, and she smiles against my lips before kissing me back.

She *loves* me.

Me.

After everything I just told her, she still loves me.

I’m not sure what I’ve done to deserve the woman in my arms, but there’s nothing I won’t do to make her stay.

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Chapter Forty-Nine

FAYE

I wake up late and smile to myself as I roll over, thinking back to the way Dion kept me up all night. He wouldn't stop telling me he loved me, and his touch was so reverent that I thought I'd lose it.

My fingertips brush over his pillow, my smile fading as I remember the guilt that's tormented him for years. I spent so long hating him, never realizing that we were both suffering.

Does being with me hurt him? Am I triggering his dreams? It's clear that he feels responsible for some of my father's actions, and I'm not sure how to take away that pain. Dion deserves to be happy, but is this something we can move past?

I sigh as I get out of bed and get ready, feeling oddly rebellious. In the last couple of days, I've slowly started to do things just because I want to. I've gotten up late and skipped piano practice, choosing to focus more on teaching at the Staccato Foundation instead. I've even started dressing in a way that would've given my old stylist a heart attack.

I pause inside our wardrobe, my eyes dropping to some of the more casual clothing Raven gave me. My hand trembles as I reach for a pair of jeans. I haven't dared wear them yet, but today I'm even more eager to reclaim a part of myself that I thought I'd lost. Perhaps it was Dion's admission and the way my fears responded to his. I'm scared he's right, and we'll only destroy each other in the end. Is that the fate that awaits us?

I bite my lip as I force my body into a pair of jeans far tighter than anything I'm accustomed to wearing. It's silly how much it means to me to wear something of my own choosing, but I'm done feeling embarrassed about chasing my dreams, however small. All I need is a little courage. I just need enough for both of us.

I grin at my reflection as I take in my jeans and t-shirt combination. It feels like a small victory to do something my father would've hated. Step by step, I'm going to reclaim what he beat out of me.

I reach for my long dark hair, a hint of longing blooming in my chest. Moments later, I've got Raven on the line. It isn't just myself I have something to prove to. I want to prove to Dion that not everything we lost is gone forever.

"Faye!" she says excitedly, and I smile in response. Breaking ties with my family nearly tore me apart, but I meant what I said then. I do have a family of my own now. I just need to be brave enough to let them in.

"Raven, hi! Do you think… I mean, um, I know you're really busy. But I was just wondering if you'd… well, I'd like to dye my hair, and I thought—"

"I know the *perfect* hairdresser," she tells me, cutting me off. "Give me ten minutes, and I'll pick you up."

True to her word, she's in front of my house ten minutes later, her hands behind the wheel of a sporty convertible that looks extremely expensive. She waves me over as I rush out of the house, her big smile making me respond in kind.

"Thank you," I tell her, unsure what else to say. "I didn't want to go by myself, and honestly, I'm still not sure this is even a good idea. Maybe… maybe I should tell Dion? I'm not sure he'd like it if I—" I shake my head and cut myself off when I realize I'm letting my old insecurities take over. "Never mind," I tell her. "I've wanted to dye my hair for years now, and I think it's time."

She looks at me with a hint of pride and nods as she drives us out of the Windsor Estate. "Honestly, sometimes you just need a physical transformation to help you with your mental ones. I'm not entirely sure what you're going through, but I'm happy you reached out." Her gaze roams over my body, and she grins. "You look hot in the jeans, by the way. Has Dion seen you like that yet?"

I shake my head, my cheeks heating furiously. “No. I… this is the first time I’ve worn them.”

She nods knowingly. “You don’t see it, but I do. The woman that walked down the aisle and the one seated next to me are two entirely different people. You’ve flourished the way I was hoping you would. I guess by now the whole world knows that Ares was meant to marry my sister instead of me, so I’m sure you understand our situations weren’t so dissimilar.” She falls silent for a moment, her hands tightening on the steering wheel. “When I married Ares, I also thought I was unwanted, and that he’d never love me. Yet just like you, I flourished in my marriage. There’s just something about these Windsor men, huh? Their hopeless devotion and their unwillingness to give up on you despite the odds, the past, the stakes. It wears a girl down in all the best ways.”

Her eyes twinkle as she glances at me, and I can’t help but smile back at her. “It does,” I admit.

Raven turns to look at me once she’s parked the car. “I just hope you’ll offer him the same devotion, Faye. Dion… he needs you more than you’ll ever know.”

“I will,” I promise, and she nods at me before stepping out of the car. I wonder if Dion realizes just how loved he is. It’s odd how I never saw all the parallels between us until now. When he told me that he thought I’d run if he showed me all of him, he truly meant it. How do I make him see himself through my eyes?

“We’re fully booked today,” the receptionist tells us when we walk in, and Raven raises one perfect brow.

“Is that so?” she asks, her voice soft. “In that case, could you please let Max Giovanni know that Raven and Faye Windsor dropped by? Please send him my love. I’ll just see him some other time then.”

The receptionist’s eyes widen, and she does a double take when Raven takes off her sunglasses. “Oh,” she breathes. “*Raven Windsor.* I… I’m so sorry for not recognizing you straight away. Please, take a seat. I’ll get Max for you straight away.”

She rushes away, and Raven throws a sheepish look my way when she finds me gawking. “Being able to say that he was responsible for the color of one of the Windsor ladies is invaluable for Max. It doesn’t matter what’s on his schedule. He’ll drop it for us.”

True to her word, I'm seated in a chair for the next few hours, with Raven by my side. I thought she'd have left after the first hour, but she just sits and regales me with stories of Dion, her attention entirely on me.

"You don't have to do this, you know?" I murmur eventually, feeling guilty.

She blinks at me in confusion. "Do what?"

"You don't have to force yourself to stay. I'll be okay by myself. Honestly, I didn't expect you to come with me at all. I thought you'd just give me a recommendation and leave it at that."

Raven laughs, genuine amusement in her eyes. "Sweetheart, you and Dion are far more alike than you realize. Is it really so hard for you to believe that I want to spend some time with my sister-in-law?"

Her smile fades then, and she looks past me for a moment. "Like I said, you and I are more similar than you realize. I've mentioned my sister, haven't I?"

I nod, suddenly feeling guilty for leading the conversation in a direction that made her bring this up. The Herald crucified Raven because of Hannah, and even I know there's no love lost between them.

"My sister and I never had the kind of bond that I've always wanted. I know what it's like to feel out of place in the home you grew up in, and I recognize that need to belong somewhere. Me being here isn't a favor, Faye. I'm here because I've always desperately wanted *real* sisters, and I found them in Sierra and Val. I was just hoping to have one more."

I bite down on my lip and nod. "I'd like that," I admit. Everything I've ever wanted… it really could be mine, if I just have the courage to reach for it.

She smirks at me and holds my hand as Max blow-dries my long maroon hair, and I stare back at my reflection in surprise. The girl I used to be might not have been able to attain the happiness I want, but the one staring back at me now? She looks like she'll fight for what she deserves.

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Chapter Fifty

DION

I pause in the doorway to our bedroom, my eyes widening. “Fuck,” I groan as I take in my wife. Her long hair is dark red and styled into big waves. The way the color contrasts with her blue eyes is stunning. Not to mention those fucking jeans. I’ve *never* seen her in jeans before, and her ass looks incredible.

Faye hesitantly raises her hand to her head, her cheeks perfectly flushed. “Um… do you like it? I always wanted to dye it, but maybe I was a little too impulsive.”

I walk toward her and roughly pull her into my arms, my lips finding hers. “Fucking stunning,” I murmur in between kisses, before sweeping her off her feet altogether, needing her closer.

She giggles against my mouth as I place her on our bed, loving how her hair fans around her. The way she looks up at me will never cease to amaze me. I’ve put all my cards on the table, and she still loves me the same. It’s hard to believe that this beautiful woman is my *wife*. How did I get this lucky?

“I love you in jeans,” I murmur. “And your hair? It’s really beautiful, darling.”

She laughs when I turn her onto her stomach on our bed, my hand slowly moving down her spine, to the curve of her ass. “I was worried you wouldn’t like it.”

I grab her ass and knead, rapidly losing my sanity. “You’re always beautiful, Faye. You could’ve dyed your hair any color, and it would’ve suited you… but this? Fuck. I thought you looked hot before, but this is unreal.”

I reach around and fumble with the button on her jeans, making her laugh with my impatience. “You won’t be laughing soon,” I warn when I fail to undo her button. She helps me out, and my cock jerks when I pull her jeans down, leaving them wrapped around her thighs. There’s something absolutely mesmerizing about the way that red sheer fabric disappears between her cheeks, the way her jeans are bunched just below the curve of her ass. Fucking gorgeous.

“On your knees,” I order, impatient. “I need to be inside you, *now*.”

She does as I ask and lifts her hips in the air, presenting me with a sight that won’t soon leave my memories. “Fuck,” I whisper as I lean in to press a soft kiss against her ass. She squirms a little, and I can’t help but smirk. She’s as impatient as I am.

“Dion,” she pleads when I kiss her right between her legs, my hot breath tickling her pussy. I chuckle and push the fabric aside before doing it again.

“Your pussy is so smooth and ready for me, baby. It looks like it’s *begging* to be eaten out.” I slowly drag my tongue down her pussy, flicking hard once I get to her clit. She shivers and tilts her hips, pushing back into my face harder. I love the way she’s becoming more and more honest about her needs. It’s so fucking sexy.

“You want to come all over your husband’s face?” I ask, teasing her.

“*Yes*,” she replies instantly, making me laugh.

“Good girl.”

I hold her hips and dive in, lapping at her until I’ve got her shaking, her pleas incoherent. I love watching her unravel. It’s such a beautiful sight, and it’s all mine. *She’s* all mine.

“Please, Dion,” she murmurs, her legs trembling.

I’d planned to keep her on the edge a little longer, but I’m not sure I’ll survive it if I do. Her pussy is too good, her moans too seductive. I need to be inside her. “Come for me, baby,” I order, just as I push two fingers into her in a come-hither motion, and just like that, she explodes for me. The way she moans when she comes gets me close, and fuck, I haven’t even undressed yet.

Faye collapses onto the bed, her face buried against the sheets and her legs folded underneath her. “Nope,” I murmur as I free my cock, too impatient to bother undressing fully. I reach for her and wrap my hand around her hair, pulling on it until I’ve got her back onto all fours. The way she moans has my cock throbbing. “You like that, huh?” I murmur as I line my cock up. Of course she likes me pulling on her hair. She’s my perfect, *perfect* wife.

I tighten my grip on her hair and push in a fraction, drawing another moan from her throat. Her jeans make her unable to spread her legs, and it makes her already tight pussy even tighter. “So fucking good,” I moan as I push in deeper. “You’re taking me so well. You’re so good at this, Faye.”

She whimpers a little. “It’s too much,” she murmurs, and I pause to let her adjust.

“You’re dripping for me, baby. I can’t get you much wetter. You can do this, my love. You can take all of me.” I push in deeper, and she moans in delight, just like I knew she would. “Look at the way you’re taking your husband’s cock. I’m so proud of you.”

Faye begins to move her hips restlessly, and I tighten my grip on her hair, making her arch her back. “What a fucking sight,” I whisper. “Do you have any idea how you look right now, with your jeans around your thighs and my cock buried deep inside you? You’re like a walking wet dream, Faye. Fucking ridiculous.”

I slam into her all the way, and she moans my name, just the way I like it. “Please, Dion,” she moans. “Take me.”

Fuck. I let go of her hair and move my hand between her legs, resting my thumb against her clit as I begin to fuck my wife properly, my strokes long and hard.

The way she tilts and moves her hips with me is a fucking delight. I can’t get enough of her. “Yeah,” she moans. “Like that.”

I love the sounds she makes for me and stroke her clit roughly, in line with my thrust. It drives her wild, and I can’t help but smile as I fuck her roughly. “Give me one more,” I order, refusing to come before she does. I’m so fucking in love with her, and I need her to feel it. My thumb is slippery as I caress her clit, my movements swift and harsh, forcing another orgasm out of her.

“I can’t,” she says, even as she meets me halfway with each thrust, a moan escaping her lips each time my thumb teases her.

“You can,” I tell her. “Give me one more, Faye. Come for your husband, my sweet girl.”

And she does, taking me right over the edge with her. The way her already tight pussy contracts around my throbbing cock undoes me, and she fucking milks every last drop out of me. “Good girl,” I murmur. “I’m so proud of you.”

I collapse on top of her, perfectly satiated and happier than I ever have been before. “I love you so fucking much, Faye,” I whisper, my face buried against her neck, and my arms wrapped around her.

“I love you more,” she murmurs, turning in my embrace, until she’s looking into my eyes.

“Say it again.” I’ll never get enough of hearing her say that. Some days, it’s still hard to believe.

“I love you, Dion Windsor.” She grins at me, a knowing look in her eyes. Yeah, she knows what kind of hold she has over me, and she loves it. As she should.

“Again.”

She grins and does as I ask, setting my heart ablaze. I’m going to do everything I can to be worthy of her love. Fuck, I’m going to make her the happiest woman on earth if it’s the last thing I do.

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Chapter Fifty-One

FAYE

"See you later, Mrs. Windsor," Larissa says, her cheeks bright red. I know I'm not supposed to have favorites when it comes to the children I teach, but she's just adorable. She's only eight, but she's got the kind of discipline and raw talent required to succeed.

"See you next week, sweetheart," I tell her, my hand brushing over her hair briefly. I can just envision her future, and I have no doubt it's brighter than she imagines. If I have anything to say about it, it certainly will be.

The moment I set foot outside the Foundation's building, bright light begins to blind me, and I freeze as shouts overwhelm me. Within seconds, two bodyguards appear out of nowhere. "Mrs. Windsor," they say. "We've been assigned by your husband. It's our duty to keep you safe, and we humbly request that you don't engage with the press. Will you please let us escort you to your car?"

I nod, confused by all the noise and light. Is this what Raven constantly has to deal with? It's overwhelming and terrifying. I've given interviews before, and I've even had paparazzi secretly take photos of me, but I've never experienced anything like this.

"Mrs. Windsor! Is it true your in-laws were responsible for the collapse of your father's mines? Is that why Windsor Media has tried to suppress the news? Are you getting a divorce? Why is your father in the hospital? It can't be a coincidence! Is it all an insurance scam?"

The accusations and insinuations continue to rain down on me as I'm led to the car, cameras flashing every few seconds. My mind whirls as the words slowly sink in. My father's mines collapsed? Worry gnaws at me, but it isn't for my father — it's for Dion. I don't even have to guess to know he's responsible for this, and perhaps I should condemn him for it, but instead, I feel a deep sense of gratitude and protectiveness. The press accused him of what happened in one breath, while accusing my father of orchestrating insurance fraud in the next. If they're going to focus on anything, I'd much rather it be the latter.

"Shall I take you home, Mrs. Windsor?" Garret asks.

I nod absentmindedly, and he drives away. "Garret?" I say moments later, my voice trembling. "Could you… could you take me to Windsor Finance?"

He nods sharply. "Certainly, ma'am."

I'm still shaking by the time we pull up in front of the massive building and my mental state must be obvious, because the receptionist looks at me with a hint of disdain, her gaze roaming over my jeans. "I'm here to see Valentina Windsor," I tell her, nearly stumbling over my words. I haven't fully thought out my plan yet, and there's no guarantee she'd even help me, but I have to try.

"Do you have an appointment?"

I shake my head. "No, but—"

She huffs. "Mrs. Windsor's schedule is packed. You will have to make an appointment to see her. I'm afraid it's near impossible to just walk in here and demand to see the COO."

"Um, then, is Luca here maybe?"

Her eyes widen, and this time, she laughs. "I'm afraid not. Mr. and Mrs. Windsor are *both* occupied this afternoon. Would you like to make an appointment?"

She stares as though she's only humoring me, and the humiliation burns. I pat my jeans, only to realize I left my phone in my bag.

"Look, I left my phone in the car or I'd have called her myself. Could you please ring her and let her know Faye is here to see her? I assure you she won't send me away."

She looks reluctant but nods politely. "I'll make an exception for you," she says, a blatantly fake smile on her face. "But please know you aren't the

first person to try this approach. She won't give interviews, and if we find a camera on you, we'll sue you."

I blink as realization dawns, and then I laugh. "You think I'm a reporter?" I ask, my thoughts clearing. I was so panicked when I stormed in here that I wasn't thinking straight, but I get it now. I'm not dressed appropriately for the office and demanded to see Val without an appointment. Of course I look dodgy.

"Please just call her," I tell her, a sweet smile on my face. I can't fault her for being protective of her bosses. If anything, I appreciate it after the ordeal I went through just now.

She nods and picks up the phone. "Your name was?"

"Faye."

Impatience flickers through her eyes. "Faye *what*? Do you have a last name?"

Irritation runs down my spine, and I purse my lips for a moment. "*Windsor*." I tip my head toward the big golden crest on the wall behind her. "Spelled just like that."

Her eyes widen, and she nearly drops her desk phone. "Oh God," she says. "I'm so incredibly sorry, Mrs. Windsor. It's just, your *hair*! We… we're given photos of all the Windsor family members, and I recognize you now, but in the photo you had brown hair!"

I grab the ends of my hair and look at it. "Right," I murmur. "Look, I need to see Val or Luca, but if that's not possible, could you at least leave a message for me?"

She snaps out of it and jumps out of her seat. "I'll escort you up personally. I cannot apologize enough, Mrs. Windsor."

Her attitude changes entirely, and by the time we reach Val's office, she's apologized at least a dozen times. If I hadn't been so preoccupied with deciding what to say to Val, I'd have felt sorry for her.

"Come in!" Val calls, and I hesitate for a moment.

Her eyes widen in surprise when she sees me, and then she rises from her seat with the biggest smile on her face. "Faye, sweetheart! What are you doing here? This is such a pleasant surprise."

She walks around her desk and hugs me tightly, and for a moment, I let myself lean into her. "What's wrong?" she asks when I pull away. "Faye, you're trembling, and you're worrying me. What's going on?"

She leads me to the seating area in her office, and I shake my head as I sit down. “It’s nothing,” I tell her. “I was just wondering about something. I realize that this is inappropriate, and likely an abuse of power, and if I ask this of you, I might destroy any relationship we could’ve had. You might find me immoral and horrible, but I—”

She grabs my hand and squeezes tightly. “Just tell me.”

“Is it true that your father’s family controls most of the insurance industry?”

Her gaze roams over my face, a calculative look in her eyes. “Not exactly, but my uncle does own the largest insurance firm in the world.”

“Would you… would you be in a position to deny an insurance claim, if… if it comes to it?”

She smiles then, the tension draining from her shoulders. “You had me worried,” she murmurs. “Do you really think I’d let our family’s hard work go to waste? Your father won’t see a single penny. He’s done. He’ll be charged with insurance fraud.”

“You knew,” I whisper.

She nods and gently brushes my hair out of my face. “Of course. There’s no way my husband could come home with blood on his clothes without explaining to me exactly how that happened. I’m so proud of him and the boys for standing up for you, and I’ll do my part where I can. You’re not alone anymore, Faye.”

I tense, humiliation rushing through me. “Did Dion tell you about… about my father’s violence toward me?”

It’s irrational, because I should be grateful he avenged me, but instead I find myself feeling betrayed. What I told him wasn’t meant for anyone but him. I didn’t want anyone to know. I’m aware that I wasn’t to blame for what happened, but a part of me still feels ashamed I let it happen at all.

Valentina’s expression darkens, and she looks away. “No,” she says, her voice soft. “I only knew about him stealing your money.” She grits her teeth and shakes her head. “I guess that explains why Luca was so cagey when he got home.”

Val gently rubs my arms and throws me a reassuring smile. “Don’t you worry about a thing, sweetie. I’ll handle any insurance claims that might arise, and the boys will handle everything else. Could I ask for something in return, though?”

I nod, intrigued by the helplessness that flashes through her eyes. “Of course.”

She hesitates and looks away for a moment, as though she’s thinking over her words before speaking. “I don’t need to remind you of the date, because you lost your mother on the same day, but…” she runs a hand through her long thick hair and inhales shakily. “Normally, the Windsor siblings gather to reminisce and celebrate their sweetest memories on the anniversary of their parents’ death, but it isn’t the same for Dion. He’s always hidden himself away, and I’m worried he’ll do the same this year. Please, Faye. Don’t let him be alone next week.”

I nod, my heart warming. “I won’t,” I promise. “I hear you, Val. I won’t let him push me away.”

She smiles at me then, relief flickering through her eyes. Dion is so loved, and I don’t think he realizes it. But he will. I’ll prove it to him, one way or another.

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Chapter Fifty-Two

FAYE

Dion hasn't replied to my text messages all day, and I'm growing increasingly concerned. Val's desperate plea has been on my mind all week, and I've been unable to push aside my growing anxiety. The anniversary of my mother's death has always been a tough day for me, but I doubt it could compare to the torment Dion must be experiencing tonight. I'm scared he's hurting all by himself, and I don't know where to begin searching for him.

"Faye."

My head snaps up, relief rushing through me when I find him standing in the doorway, his gaze unsteady. He takes a hesitant step into the living room, guilt flickering through his eyes. I can smell the liquor on him from all the way here.

He pauses in front of me, his gaze heated yet hesitant. He looks at me like he can't believe I'm real, like I might be a mirage. I reach for him and wrap my arms around his neck, my face tipped up toward his.

"Where were you?" I ask, my voice soft.

He tries to smile for me, but can't quite manage it. "My parents' home. It's odd, you know? That piano behind you always haunted me, but you took away its power and restored it to what it used to be. That's what you do to me. You take each broken piece, and without even realizing it, you put me back together. I don't deserve you, but fuck, am I grateful I've got you."

I rise to my tiptoes and pull him down, my lips finding his. His touch is reverent, cautious, and I pull him closer, demanding more. He gives in for a moment, only to pull away and drop his forehead against mine.

"You are both my torment and my salvation, my muse and my damnation. For you, I'll willingly go to the depths of hell. Did you know that?"

I smile and tighten my grip on him. The smell of liquor always used to scare me, and he took away its power the way I removed the hold the concert grand has over him. "I know, but I hope you realize I'll be there every step of the way. You don't want to lead me to hell, do you? If you burn, I'll burn with you."

His gaze flickers with a hint of disbelief and awe, and I can't help but smile at him. "No matter where you go, I'll be right by your side, Dion. You once told me that my broken pieces complete you, yet you find it hard to believe I feel the same way. I wish you could see yourself through my eyes."

He sighs, his grip tightening as his eyes move past me. "Will you play for me, angel?"

"I'll do anything for you." I grab his hand and lead him to his mother's piano. "Do you want to sit? We can play together if you want?"

He shakes his head and sits down on the floor, his legs extended beside my bench and his back pressed to the piano as he faces me. "No, I just need to hear you play *La Campanella* for me. Did you know that my heart nearly stopped that night I walked into the house to find you playing my mother's favorite piece on her piano? I hadn't been able to listen to it for years, but there you were, looking like a fucking goddess. I was powerless before you, unable to look away or speak a single word in defiance of your presence. Make me feel that way again, Faye. Enthrall me. Enchant me. Do to me what no one but you can do."

My fingers tremble slightly as I begin to play Liszt's famous piece, and Dion's eyes fall closed, the edges of his lips tipping up into a smile. I watch him as I play the piece Tara Windsor mastered like no other, pure bliss on his face.

His eyes open as though he feels my gaze, and my breath hitches. He grins at me knowingly and reaches for me, his touch featherlight as his fingers graze over my thighs. I bite down on my lip when he parts my legs, his eyes seeking permission.

I nod sharply, and he nudges my bench a fraction, just enough to move between my legs. “Keep playing,” he pleads as he leans in, his breath dancing over my skin. “You take away the pain, Faye. You make me forget, and you give me hope I don’t deserve to have. When I’m touching you, everything else fades away.”

He kisses my thighs, slowly inching his way up. He looks at me with such desperation in his eyes that I couldn’t deny him if I wanted to. There’s such power in being able to provide consolation when all else fails.

His lips brush over my silk underwear, and he inhales deeply before pressing a soft kiss against it, making me miss a few notes. He’s already forced me to play without my pedals, but if he keeps going this way, the piece he wants me to play will end up unrecognizable. I doubt he cares, though.

His fingers wrap around the edge of the delicate silk fabric, and he tears it apart, pulling it off me with a sharp tug that makes me gasp. He smiles up at me before dipping in, his tongue brushing over the apex of my thigh, inching closer to where I want him at an excruciating slow pace.

“Again,” he orders when I play the final note. “Play it until it no longer hurts, Faye. Please.”

I start all over again, doing what he asked. I’ll play until this beautiful melody brings him joy instead of pain. I’ll take away its power and rewrite every emotion he’s associated with it.

Dion’s tongue brushes over my clit, and he chuckles when a soft moan escapes my lips. The sound of his laughter lifts the somber mood, and I tilt my hips a little to give him better access.

Soon, you’ll think of me every time you play, and each time I hear the sound of a piano, I’ll think of you.

That’s what he told me two weeks before our wedding, but I didn’t understand his words then, not truly. I do now.

“More,” I beg, my touch on the keys no longer as controlled, the volume varying far more than it should. His touch will forever change *La Campanella* for me — I’ll never be able to play it again without needing him.

“You’re so beautiful,” he whispers, his voice filled with affection. “My beautiful, delicious wife.” His tongue rolls around my clit, not quite giving me what I need yet slowly, steadily, pushing me toward the edge. I’m so tempted to bury my hands in his hair and force him to give me what he’s

keeping from me, but I don't. If he needs me to play, that's exactly what I'll do.

My desperation bleeds into the music, the tone turning rougher, the pacing entirely off. He revels in it, loves the way I lose control for him.

"You like that, don't you?" he asks as his tongue finally flicks over my clit. "You're such a good girl, Faye. Tell me, does this good girl deserve to come?"

I moan, my hips restless and my hands shaking. The music's pace is too quick, the piece too hard to play flawlessly when he touches me like that. "Yes," I beg. "Please, Dion. I've been so good for you. *Please*."

"Yeah," he whispers. "You're perfect for me."

And then he finally lets me have what I've been begging for, just as I play the last few notes of *La Campanella*, my moans mixing in with the music, until it becomes something else entirely — something that's uniquely ours.

"I love you," he murmurs when I pull my hands away from the piano to bury them into his hair instead. "So much, Faye. You have no idea."

I smile at him as he places his head on my lap, his arms wrapping around my waist. "I love you too, Dion. More than you'll ever know."

"I'm sorry," he whispers. "I've been so selfish today, angel. I know today is tough for you, too, but here I am, asking so much of you. Fuck."

I shake my head and tighten my grip on him. "Don't do that," I plead. "This was perfect. It's exactly what I needed, so don't take this from me, okay? Don't let your guilt warp an experience that's bound to stay with me for years to come."

He lifts his head to look into my eyes, his gaze burning with an emotion I'll never get enough of. "I need to find a moment to thank your mother," he says, his voice soft. "I've only ever begged for her forgiveness, but I realize now that I should be thanking her, too. For giving me *you*. I swear I won't let her down, Faye. Every single day, I'll do everything in my power to become worthy of you. I'll never stop fighting for you, for us."

I brush a hand through his hair and shake my head. "You don't have to try," I whisper. "You're already beyond worthy of me, Dion. You always have been."

He looks at me like he doesn't believe me, but I'll spend the rest of my life convincing him of it. He doesn't think he's worth fighting for, and I want nothing more than to prove him wrong.

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Chapter Fifty-Three

Dion

I look up when my office door opens without a prior knock, my eyes widening when Grandma walks in. Her usual stern expression is notably absent today, caring concern having replaced it. It's a curious sight to see her looking like the grandmother I used to know, instead of the ruthless matriarch she has become.

"Dion," she says when I rise from my seat. "You were missed at your parents' memorial service. I wish you could've made it, sweetheart."

I look away and nod. "Maybe next year," I murmur. I've said that for years, but this time, I actually mean it. With Faye by my side, I might be able to sit through my siblings' endless stories without feeling guilty that they won't ever get to make more memories with Mom and Dad.

I lead Grandma to the seating area in my office, my mind already trying to work out what brings her here. She's been surprisingly quiet since I got married. Based on what Ares and Luca told me, I'd expected her to meddle far more than she has. Perhaps the worst is yet to come. I'm not foolish enough to lower my guard around her.

"What can I do for you, Grandma?" I say eventually, when she remains quiet. She seems lost in thought, as though she isn't quite sure why she's here. I've never seen her act without purpose, and her behavior has my hackles raised.

“I understand Faye’s father miraculously found himself in the hospital with countless broken bones,” she says eventually. “He claims he has no recollection of what happened. Weird, isn’t it? Even more so, considering all of his mines collapsed on the same day he went missing.”

I nod thoughtfully. “I’d heard of that. Such a shame.”

She narrows her eyes. “It was even more curious that Silas Sinclair couldn’t find out a thing about any of it.”

I purse my lips and nod. “That’s so weird. But then again, Silas tends to have his own agenda. He has a habit of defying you when he disagrees with your methods, you know that.”

Grandma crosses her arms and shoots me a chastising look. “Cut the crap,” she snaps. “What happened? What could he possibly have done for you to destroy him so thoroughly?”

I look away and take a deep breath. “It isn’t my story to tell, Grandma. Just trust that he deserved what he got. All I can really tell you is that he was embezzling Faye’s concert income for years and led her to believe she wasn’t earning much at all. He made her financially dependent on him and tried to control her every action until recently.”

Her expression falls, as though her worst fears are confirmed, when she doesn’t know the half of it. “I tried to protect her, you know? It was your mothers who decided the two of you should get engaged, but they had no plans to bring it up until you were much older. I enforced that engagement in an effort to maintain my ties to Faye.”

She runs a hand through her hair, and I frown when I realize her hand is trembling. “Faye’s father has always been rough, and neither your mother nor I ever liked him. When we lost Felicity and your parents, I was worried about what might happen to Faye. I felt that the engagement was one of very few ways I could tie her to us. I wanted to keep an eye on her and be there for her as she grew up, without necessarily intruding. Jimmy had always been money-motivated, so I thought offering the amount I did would ensure he’d treat her with care. Was I wrong, Dion? Did my actions harm her?”

I stare at my grandmother, my thoughts reeling. If she hadn’t interfered, would Jimmy have forced Faye to become a pianist? He might not have wanted to invest in her at such an early age, and she likely would have had a more stable childhood.

His nature would never have changed, though. Eventually, he'd have found a way to use her, and without Grandma's interference, we never could've saved her from that home. I've always lost myself in *what-ifs*, but for the first time ever, I realize the present matters more than a past we can't change.

"I'm not sure," I tell her honestly. "I wish that was a question I could answer, Grams, because it's one I've asked myself countless times."

Her eyes roam over my face, and she draws a shaky breath. "I'm the one who set all of this into motion, but it was never my intention to make both of you miserable." She looks down and shakes her head. "You might find me meddlesome, but everything I do is for you and your siblings. As the years passed, I became convinced that being with her would heal you, that it would be a way for you to move beyond the past, together. I never intended to make matters worse, but I have, haven't I?" She rises to her feet and begins to pace in my office.

"You haven't," I murmur eventually. "I hate to admit this, but I… I'm happy with her, Grandma. I won't lie to you and say the past doesn't still haunt me, but she loosened its hold over me. Being with her gives me purpose. Faye isn't anything like what I expected, and she makes me want to be a better man."

Grandma looks at me, a hint of relief in her eyes. "Does she feel the same way? I wanted to save her, Dion, not entrap her. If what you're telling me about her father is true, then how are we any better? The rules I laid down were meant to bring you two closer — it was never my intention to suffocate her the way he must have."

I look past her for a moment, my insecurities surging to the surface. "She tells me she loves me, and I think I believe her. I'm not sure she truly is as happy as she'd like me to think, but there's nothing I won't do to turn her lies into reality."

The look in Grandma's eyes is so pained that I can't hold her gaze. "Dion," she says, her voice soft. "I won't hold you to our agreement. If you two truly are happy together, then you have my unconditional blessing, but if you aren't…" She crosses her arms and looks past me, out the window. "We can't do to her what her father did."

My stomach drops and a chill runs down my spine. "What exactly are you saying, Grandma?"

She smiles tightly. “I’m saying that I’ll grant you a divorce if you think it’s in either of your best interests. It’s not my intention to harm Faye, and if you believe that’s what I’ve done by forcing you into this marriage, I’ll do what I can to make it right.”

I stare at her speechlessly, pure unadulterated fear coursing through me. If I gave Faye a choice, would she choose me?

No. I don’t think she will.

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Chapter Fifty-Four

FAYE

My heart is pounding as I walk up to the pool, where Dion has been swimming laps for over an hour. It isn't often that we both have a weekend fully free, but whenever we do, we try to spend it together. Yet all day, he's avoided me, coming up with one excuse after another.

"Dion?"

He looks up at me, and I smile nervously as I drop my towel, standing at the edge of our pool completely naked, a champagne bottle in one hand and glasses in the other.

"*Fuck*," he groans. His gaze roams over my body hungrily as he rises from the water, slowly making his way toward me.

"Do you mind if I join you?"

He shakes his head, unable to tear his eyes off me, and I can't help but smile. Relief rushes through me, and some of my unease is put to rest. I know he's often busy at work, and so am I, but he's been different in the last couple of days. It could just be lingering desolation from his parents' and my mom's death anniversary, but it feels like more than that. There's distance between us that wasn't there before, and I have every intention of bridging it.

Dion reaches for me, and I grin as he helps me into our heated pool. "Champagne, moonlight, and my sexy wife," he says as his hands find my

waist. My legs wrap around him instantly, and he smiles down at me. “Perfection.”

“I missed you,” I murmur.

His expression falls for a split second, but then he forces a smile. It isn’t the same carefree teasing smirks I’ve gotten used to, but it’s more than he’s given me all week. “I missed you too, angel,” he whispers.

I hold on to him tightly as he reaches for the bottle I placed at the edge of the pool. “This reminds me a little of Hawaii,” I tell him. “That was actually the first time I’d ever had champagne, you know?”

He chuckles. “Was it? I’m honored I got to share that first experience with you.”

My eyes roam over his body leisurely. “You got all of my firsts, Dion. All the ones that matter, anyway.”

His smile slips again, and he looks past me, busying himself with the glasses. “Here you go,” he says, his voice soft.

Normally, he’d have wanted to toast to *us*, but today he simply lifts his glass to his lips and empties half of it instantly. I raise a brow and take a sip before untangling myself, only to remember that the pool is too deep for me to stand properly.

I gasp and flail, dropping all of my champagne into the water, and Dion bursts out laughing as he pulls me back to him. “Fucking adorable,” he groans, his forehead dropping to mine.

“Not funny,” I chastise, but he just continues to smile at me, amusement dancing in his eyes.

“It’s a little funny, baby.”

I pout at him, and his gaze heats as his eyes drop to my mouth. A soft, needy whimper escapes my lips, and his hand threads through my hair. His touch is rough as his lips come crashing against mine with the same urgency I’m feeling.

My back is pressed against the pool’s wall, and he moans into my mouth, his hips tilting into me, his desire obvious. We’re both panting when he pulls his lips off mine, and I can’t help but smile. I’d been so worried something was wrong, but that kiss… it’s exactly what I needed.

“Let’s try this again, hmm?” he says, reaching for the champagne bottle to refill our empty glasses. It’s a miracle we’ve both managed to hold on to them at all.

I raise my topped-up glass to his, a hint of defiance rushing through me. “To us,” I say, my tone sharp.

Dion smiles as he taps his glass against mine. “To us, angel.”

His eyes are glued to mine as he lifts his champagne glass to his lips and takes a sip, and just like that, everything feels right in my world.

“I love you,” I murmur, the words rushing out of me without any rhyme or reason. I’ve never felt this way before, so desperate to reassure him when I can’t even pinpoint why.

He places his glass down at the pool’s edge and places his arms on either side of me. “I love you more, Faye.”

I reach for him hesitantly and brush his hair out of his face. “What’s going on, Dion? You seem sad, somehow. Is there anything I can do to make it better?”

He shakes his head. “Stay,” he whispers. “Just stay with me, Faye.”

I nod and study him carefully. “I had no intention of going anywhere.”

He looks away for a moment, and when his eyes find mine, there’s something in them I can’t quite read. “But if you did, if you could, where would you go? If not for me and this marriage, what would your life look like, baby?”

I bite my lip as I ponder his question. “There are a few things I’ve always wanted to do, but I… well, I just, I think we could still do them. Together.”

His eyes widen a fraction, hope dancing in them. It makes his whole face come alive, and I can’t help but smile. Is that what this is about? Is he worried about the restrictions placed on us because of our marriage?

“Tell me about your wildest dreams, Faye. I want to know.”

I place my glass down beside his and wrap my arms around his neck, my face tipped up toward the sky. “I’ve always wanted to eat gelato in Italy and throw a coin in the Trevi fountain. I already know what wish I’d make too.”

“Yeah? What would you wish for?”

I shake my head, a soft giggle escaping my lips. “I can’t tell you, or it won’t come true.”

Dion reaches for me, his lips brushing over my exposed throat. I lean back against the pool’s edge to give him better access, my heart fully at ease now. “What else, my darling wife?”

“I want to dance in the rain, with *you*. Take the train through Europe and enjoy the scenery. You don’t like flying, so it’d be ideal, right?”

“It’d be perfect,” he whispers, his teeth grazing over my ear. I shiver and tighten my legs around his waist, my heart racing. “What else?”

“I want to see the Eiffel Tower, and the Berlin Wall. Just the idea of walking amongst the remnants of history fills me with such humility and reverence.”

“What else?” His hand makes its way in between my legs, and I moan when he teases me, his touch gentle, careful.

“I want to cycle through Amsterdam with you and kiss you at every canal we go past. We’ll be obnoxious tourists that all the locals will hate, and I’ll love every second of it.”

He chuckles, and I push his swim shorts down, desperate for something more than just his fingers. I need to feel closer to him. He’s right here with me, yet he feels so far away, and I can’t figure out why.

Dion gasps when I line him up against me, but he pulls away, his expression dark. “Would it truly be okay if I make your dreams my own? Can I insert myself into the future you envisioned for yourself, Faye?”

“Yes,” I tell him, my tone unwavering. I reach for him and push the tip in, not taking no for an answer when he clearly needs me just as desperately. “Yes, Dion. I want it all with you.”

He groans and slips into me just a fraction, holding back still. “Tell me you’re sure, Faye. Tell me you want to spend the rest of your life with me until we’re old and gray. I’ll make every single one of your dreams come true, so long as you stay with me.”

I grab his face and look into his eyes, taking in his desperation, his insecurities. “I’m sure,” I tell him. “I want you for the rest of our lives, Dion. I want it all with you.”

He bites down on his lip, his breathing shallow as he studies me, as though he’s trying to check for insincerity. He won’t find any. “I will never let you go, Faye. Not even if you beg me to.”

“Good,” I murmur. “Because I don’t want you to.”

He pushes into me, a loud moan escaping his lips as pure delight takes over his face. “You’re mine,” he groans, before pulling back almost all the way. “All mine.” He slams back into me, drawing a low, needy whimper from my throat. The need in his touch is palpable, and it fills me with equal parts confidence and relief.

“Yours,” I agree, my lips finding his. I’ll never tire of this, of us. All of my dreams fade in comparison to the reality he’s crafted — I just wish he saw it too.

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Chapter Fifty-Five

DION

I stare up at the building that houses the Windsor Staccato Foundation, feeling uneasy. I've steadfastly avoided stepping foot in here, but I didn't have it in me to deny my wife when she asked me to meet her here. I could just wait outside, but I'm dying to see her. Every second waiting out here when I could be right next to her seems an unnecessary waste.

My stomach twists when I walk in, the interior still so eerily familiar. For a moment, I deceive myself into thinking that I'll walk into one of the many classrooms to find my mother or Aunt Felicity teaching with those big smiles on their faces. This was their happy place, and it seems serendipitous that it's now Faye's.

I pause in the doorway when I hear the sounds of laughter and terribly played notes. Years have passed, but some things never change. I wonder what our mothers would think if they saw Faye here. Would they be proud of the way my wife has upheld their legacy?

For so long, I feared walking in here, convinced the guilt would wreck me, but instead, I find myself smiling at my beautiful wife. Faye is most beautiful when she's seated behind a piano.

She looks up, her eyes widening when she notices me. "Dion!"

The kids all follow her gaze, their curiosity clear. A few of the little boys in her class throw me annoyed looks, and I can't help but chuckle. I

suppose Faye is a really hot teacher, so I can hardly blame them for their little crushes.

She rises from her seat, and I walk into her classroom, meeting her halfway. “I can’t believe you’re here. I thought you’d meet me outside. I didn’t think…” She snaps her lips shut, and I grin at her. My wife is fucking adorable. She’s so caring, so thoughtful. I’m not sure how I got this lucky.

“I hope I’m not interrupting?”

She shakes her head and grabs my hand as she drags me back to her piano. “Class,” she says, her smile so wide that her kids can’t help but smile in return. “This is my husband, Dion Windsor.”

A few giggles erupt amongst the girls, and I feel my cheeks heat. She’s got a variety of ages in her classroom today, and the way her teenagers are looking at me makes me decidedly uncomfortable.

“We’re learning how to play Für Elise,” she tells me. “It’s a classic, and the beginning of it is easy enough.” She turns to her class then. “Do you guys want to see my husband try? He hasn’t really played in years, but I bet he can do it. If he can play it in full, I don’t want to hear a single complaint out of you going forward!”

Cheers and taunts follow me as Faye pushes me toward her seat, the excitement in the classroom easing my discomfort. It looks like half her kids are hoping I’ll fail so she’ll assign them an easier piece, and the other half wants to see me succeed, likely purely on her behalf.

Faye looks at me when I stare at the keys absentmindedly. “Please?” she murmurs, her smile slipping just a fraction.

My heart skips a beat, and I nod. There isn’t much I won’t do to protect that smile of hers, but I doubt she realizes just what she’s asking of me. Or perhaps she does, and she simply knows I need a push.

I begin to play Beethoven’s iconic piece, my fingers feeling stiffer than they used to, yet the melody flows out of me with such magical ease that it takes my breath away. I’ve become so used to playing drunk, as an outlet for my despair, that I forgot how amazing it feels to truly lose yourself in music when you’re perfectly lucid. My mind empties, every single one of my worries melting away, until there’s nothing but Faye’s hand on my shoulder and the tune she asked me to play. She has no idea what she does to me, what she does *for* me.

The kids all clap excitedly when the final note rings, and Faye looks into my eyes with such deep affection that I find myself unable to look

away. I'm so overcome with love for this woman that I'm not sure there's anything I wouldn't do for her.

"I haven't played like that in over twenty years," I admit, a hint of disbelief rushing through me. I forgot how exhilarating it can be.

Faye's eyes shimmer with something I can't quite define. "I'm proud of you," she whispers. "When we composed together, it seemed like you missed playing, but I was sure you'd say no."

"I couldn't," I murmur, shaking my head.

"Why?"

I reach for her and gently brush her hair out of her face. "Because you asked me to play."

"Just like that?"

I nod. "For you? Always."

She leans in, her lips brushing against mine softly, tenderly, and I sigh against her mouth as I kiss her back, taking my time with her. Not even her kids' taunts and shouts tear me away from her. I don't think anything could.

"I love you," she whispers.

I grin at her. "I love you more."

Faye pulls away with bright red cheeks, and I don't think she's ever been more beautiful. God, I'm fucking done for. She owns me.

"That's all for today," she tells her class, smiling brilliantly. "Remember, no more complaints! We'll practice this piece again next week!"

She ignores the grumbles as her classroom slowly empties, and I throw her a roguish grin when the door falls closed behind her last student. "You know," I murmur, my arms wrapping around her waist. "I've always wanted to fuck a teacher. What do you say, Mrs. Windsor?"

She gasps and slaps my chest, but I notice the way her eyes darken with interest. She's fucking perfect for me, in each and every way. "Are you crazy?" she whisper-shouts, even as she pushes her body up against mine.

"Yeah," I murmur as I lean in and brush my lips against her. "I'm absolutely crazy about you, my darling wife."

"We'll get caught," she warns, but I smother her complaints with a kiss.

"Then you'd better be a good girl, angel. Can you be quiet for me?"

She bites down on my lip before brushing her tongue over it, drawing a moan from my throat. "Yes," she whispers. "*Yes*."

Fucking perfect. I don’t think I’ve ever been happier. I just hope she feels the same.

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Chapter Fifty-Six

DION

I hold up my hand, and the meeting room falls silent as I stare at my phone. That's the third time Lex has called me in the last fifteen minutes. Something must be wrong.

"I need to take this. Let's reconvene in fifteen."

My executives nod, and they slowly begin to leave the room as I pick up the phone. "What's going on, Lex?"

"Did you see the news?" he asks, his tone frantic.

I frown and shake my head. "Nothing flagged as particularly interesting today," I say carefully.

"Not the real news, dumbass. The gossip papers."

"Why don't you enlighten me," I tell him, my tone harsh. "Since you felt the need to interrupt an important board meeting over some bullshit gossip."

"Celeste got engaged. To Clifton Emerson."

"*Fuck*."

Lex sighs. "Yeah. I haven't been able to reach Zane, but I'm tracking his phone as we speak."

I rise from my seat. "Okay, I'm leaving the office now. Impromptu poker night, I'm guessing?"

"That's what I was thinking. He'll be a wreck. Zane nearly lost it when she reappeared out of nowhere. When they broke up, he warned her not to

appear in front of him ever again, and now she isn't just *back*, she's marrying his biggest business rival? What the fuck?"

"She's playing with fire," I murmur as I head to my private elevator. "What are we going to do?"

"I'm not sure. Despite Zane's threats, he doesn't want any of us to touch her. I don't know, man. Maybe he's over her now. It's about time he lets her go. If she's engaged… well, I guess he's got no choice."

I shake my head as I step into my car. "Nah," I murmur. "We both know it won't be that simple. He begged Grandma to let him marry her right before he broke up with her. He really loved her. There's no way he'll stand back and let this happen."

"Found him," Lex says, his tone conveying his relief. "Xave will pick him up. Ares and Luca are already on their way to mine. Zane isn't going to want to talk about this, but we need to do something. If we leave him be, he'll end up doing something he regrets."

"Agreed," I murmur, at a loss. "Did you ever find out the full story?"

Lex hesitates. "No. I've been tempted to, but it feels too invasive. I figured he'd tell us when he's ready. You?"

I sigh. "No. Same."

Lex meets me outside his house, and I end the call moments before getting out of the car. Ares and Luca pull up behind me moments later, their expressions just as worried as mine.

"How do you think he'll handle this? Sarcasm or anger?" Luca asks.

Ares and I both chuckle. "Sarcasm," we say, just as Lex says, "anger."

"You're on," I murmur.

Lex smirks. "If I win, we're calling my latest invention the Lex-board."

I groan, unsure if that's a price I'm willing to pay. It's far too embarrassing. "Deal," I mutter reluctantly. "But if I win, I never want to hear that name again."

His arguments die down when Xavier parks next to me, a reluctant Zane in his passenger seat.

"What the fuck is this supposed to be?" Zane says, a fake smile on his face. "A fucking intervention?"

His gaze settles on Ares, and he points at him. "You had a fucking breakdown when you first found out Raven was seeing Silas, even though you were *engaged* to her *sister*." He turns to Luca next and raises his brow. "And *you*. You were in near fucking tears when Val quit her job and went

on a date with someone else. You lost your goddamn mind." He looks at me then, and I tense. "Don't even get me started on you, Dion. You threw your wife's fucking phone in the goddamn ocean because she spoke to her ex, and you weren't even married yet. I don't want any input from any of you fucking idiots."

I glance at Lex, and he shrugs. A combination of both? It isn't really anger, and it isn't really sarcasm either. It's deflection.

"I mean," Xavier says, holding up his hand. "Lex and I—"

"Shut up," Zane cuts him off. "I don't even know why you're here, honestly. How exactly did you worm your way into Windsor poker nights? And *why*? Am I really supposed to believe you're here for our sparkling personalities? I get that you're Dion's friend, but why are you always here, even when he isn't?"

Xavier tenses and crosses his arms, a challenging look in his eyes. "*Excuse me*," he says, clearly trying to suppress the hint of danger that usually radiates around him. "I thought we were *besties*. Are you telling me you don't feel this thing between us?"

I bite back a smile, and Lex laughs, breaking the tension. "Okay, fine. No questions, alright? Let's just play poker and get drunk," he says.

Zane grunts noncommittally and follows Lex into the house. I'll settle for that. Zane is unpredictable at the best of times, and I'm not sure he should be left alone today. For both his and Celeste's sakes.

He doesn't say a word throughout the first few rounds, but he continues to drink everything we put in front of him. "You still love her, huh?" I murmur eventually. It's obvious that he wants to take the edge off the pain, or better yet, forget entirely. I've been in his shoes, though the circumstances weren't quite the same. I've been running from pain for years.

He looks up sharply and clenches his jaws. "No," he denies. "I fucking hate her with all I've got. I warned her I'd destroy her if I ever laid eyes on her again, so if she has half a brain, she'll stay far away from me."

Ares shakes his head. "That's impossible. Emerson moves in the same circles as us. There's no escaping her. You'll run into her eventually."

Zane nods slowly, a twisted smile making its way onto his lips. "She knows exactly what she's doing. She wants to marry that piece of trash? Let her. I'll make the day she takes his name one to remember. I warned her,

and she's choosing to defy me. I'm going to tear her apart, piece by piece, until she's begging me for mercy. Not even Clifton Emerson can save her."

The room falls silent, and I reach for my whiskey glass. What the fuck did Celeste do to him? He hasn't been the same since they broke up, and this darkness? Fuck. I'm worried it'll consume them both.

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Chapter Fifty-Seven

FAYE

"Where are we?" I ask as Dion leads me down the airplane's steps. He all but kidnapped me this morning, and I still have no idea why. Based on the duration of our flight, I'm guessing we're somewhere in Europe, but where?

Dion simply grins at me. "You'll see."

A black car is waiting for us on the tarmac, and he leads me to it with palpable excitement. I can't help but smile at him. Whatever he's up to, he's clearly put a lot of thought into this outing.

"Is this your way of making up for staying out all night last week?" I ask, my brow raised.

Dion smiles sheepishly. "I told you, I was just at Lex's house. We all had way too much to drink, and we just crashed there. I was literally ten minutes away from you, I swear."

I roll my eyes. "I know," I tell him. "Sierra pulled the security footage to appease Val's anger."

His lips part a little in shock, and I burst out laughing. "Don't look at me like that," I murmur. "It wasn't me."

"Honestly," he says. "I truly pity the man that ends up marrying her. We've had a lifetime to get used to her antics, and she still shocks me every once in a while."

I bump his shoulder with mine. "Any man would be *lucky* to have Sierra!"

He shakes his head and purses his lips, clearly choosing not to fight this battle. Smart man. “Oh my god,” I murmur as the scenery begins to make sense. “We’re in Italy!”

Dion grabs my hand and entwines our fingers. “I told you I’d make all of your dreams come true, right? I know our marriage isn’t conventional, and baby, I know I haven’t always treated you right, especially when you were younger. There’s so much I regret, but I’m tired of letting it weigh me down. I want this with you, Faye. If you’ll let me, I’ll make all of your dreams my own.”

I smile at him, a burst of emotion hitting me hard. “Even if it means getting on horrible long-haul flights?”

He smirks at me. “There’s nothing I won’t do for you, angel. Haven’t you realized that by now?” He lifts our joined hands to his lips and gently kisses the back of my hand, a pleading look in his eyes, almost as though he’s wishing this’ll be enough to make me happy, when it’s far more than I ever could’ve hoped for.

“I love you,” I murmur.

Dion grins and glances out the window as the car stops in front of a square. “You’re about to love me a whole lot more, darling.” He leads me out of the car and onto a large square with fountains in the middle and restaurants surrounding it. “See that tiny little booth at the back? That’s the best gelato you can find in all of Rome.”

I stare at him in disbelief as we walk toward it, hand in hand. “Gelato in Italy,” I murmur, surprised he remembered what I told him that night in our pool. I’m so used to feeling invisible that it still astounds me when he proves to me that he really does listen.

Dion smiles at me so indulgently, and it all just seems unreal. For years, the thought of marrying him terrified me, but with each day that passes, he stills more of my fears, until they became non-existent, leaving only pure faith in their wake.

Minutes later, I find myself staring at my gelato in astonishment, and he just chuckles at me. “It’ll melt, my love.”

I nod and take a bite, my eyes falling closed as the flavors hit my tongue. “Oh god,” I murmur. “This is the best thing I’ve ever had. It’s *delicious*.”

Dion laughs, and I belatedly realize he’s filming me. I lunge for his phone, but he holds it up above my head, out of reach. “*Dion*!”

His arm wraps around my waist as he smiles down at me. “That was better than I expected,” he tells me. “I’ll definitely be playing that when I’m in bed all by myself. I’ll just have to imagine it’s my cock you’re gushing over.”

I try my hardest to glare at him, but it’s too hard to even fake it when he makes me so insanely happy. “I’m deleting that the first chance I get,” I warn him, pulling away to focus on my ice-cream. He’s right, it’s melting rapidly, and there’s no way I’m letting this deliciousness go to waste.

“Just this one moment was worth that shitty flight,” he murmurs, his gaze trained on me. The way he looks at me will never get old. When we’re together, it’s like nothing else exists, like I’m all he can see. I’ve never felt special at all, until Dion.

“You were right,” I murmur as I throw my empty cup in the garbage bin. “I do love you even more now. It’s got nothing to do with the gelato, or this dream trip. It’s you, Dion. I just really love *you*. I’d love you without all of this, simply because you’re you. I hope you realize that.”

He reaches for me just as a big fat raindrop hits my nose, and I gasp as heavy rainfall comes pouring down on us.

“We should run!” I tell him, but he simply pulls me into his arms and shakes his head.

“Or we could dance. You and me, Faye. Right here, on this empty square in Rome. Will you dance with me, angel?”

I laugh, my heart beating out of my chest. “With you, Dion? Always.”

He hums a tune I vaguely recognize as he sways with me, both of us rapidly becoming soaked, yet it doesn’t seem to faze him. He just stares at me like nothing else matters.

“This is better,” I admit. “The dreams I had don’t hold a candle to the reality of you, Dion.”

He pauses and just stares at me for a moment, almost as though he still struggles to believe my words. I’ll remind him for all of eternity if I have to. He saved me, breathed life into me when I was lost. I’ll do the same for him for as long as I need to.

Dion’s head dips toward mine, and my eyes fall closed when he kisses me slowly, his touch desperate. His tongue brushes against mine, and I moan, lost in this moment with him. My wildest dreams couldn’t have prepared me for him.

His breathing is labored when he pulls away, his forehead dropping to mine. “I love you, Faye. I really do want to make all of your dreams come true, but is that the right thing to do? You deserve a choice, baby. With me, your dreams have to fit into the few free days I have every once in a while. You’ll never have the true freedom you crave. You should be able to chase your dreams on your terms — not mine. I desperately want to be selfish with you, but I can’t. I love you too much to clip your wings.” He pulls away a little to look at me, pure torment dancing in his eyes. “If you want me to let you go, I will. All of this… the adventures, traveling, everything you wanted to do before me. You can have all of that, if it’s what you want. You deserve to have a choice. I spoke to my grandmother, and she assured me we can get a divorce without any penalties if it’s what you want. I don’t want to do to you what your father did, Faye. I can’t. I won’t control you simply because I can’t imagine a life without you. My needs should never come before yours.”

I take in his pained expression, the way his voice wavers, as though it kills him to even say the words. I can see it in his eyes. He thinks that losing me is inevitable.

“I do,” I murmur. “I do deserve a choice. I’ve never had one before, you know?”

Dion nods, his arms falling away as he takes a step away from me, his expression tightening as he forces a smile to his face.

“Dion, every second of every day, I choose *you*. Even when you don’t want me to. Even on days that feel impossibly hard. I’ll always choose you.”

He looks at me in such disbelief, as though he can’t quite believe his ears, and I can’t help but smirk as I rise to my tiptoes and pull him back down toward me. His arms wrap around me, and he lifts me off my feet as he kisses me.

He is my ultimate dream, my greatest wish. It just took me a while to realize that.

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Chapter Fifty-Eight

FAYE

Dion tenses when the same two bodyguards that he assigned me walk into our living room, their gazes apologetic. “Mr. and Mrs. Windsor,” the taller one says.

“Andrew?” Dion asks, his brows raised in annoyance.

I stare in rapt fascination. These two men appear as and when they please, never staying long enough for me to ask questions. All Dion has told me about them is that they work for Silas Sinclair, but they seem dangerous somehow, despite their expensive black suits.

“Theo and I apprehended Mrs. Windsor’s father outside the premises. He insists on speaking to you and is threatening to go to the press if we deny him entry. How would you like to proceed?”

My eyes widen, and I blindly reach for Dion’s hand. “Must’ve come directly from the hospital,” Dion murmurs. “I suppose this was to be expected. It’s been an awfully quiet few weeks while he was recovering.” He turns to look at me, clearly waiting for my response. “What would you like to do, angel? We can simply send him away if you want.”

A chill runs down my spine at the thought of my father, and I shake my head. “I’m worried about what he might say to the paparazzi. I think… I think it would be better to hear him out.”

Dion’s eyes roam over me, and then he nods. “Whatever you want, darling.”

Andrew and Theo both nod at me politely as they walk back out, and Dion leans back against the sofa. “Remember that you aren’t alone anymore, okay?” he says, his tone fervent.

I look into his eyes, taking in his sincerity, his silent support. He reaches for me and gently brushes my hair out of my face, a soft sigh escaping his lips. “I can make him disappear if you want, you know? It’s not too late to do that.”

My eyes widen a fraction, and he looks away, his expression shuttering closed, as though he’s worried he’s scared me. I wonder how long it’ll take for him to realize that I’ll never see him the way I saw my father. I’ll never fear him like that.

“*Faye*,” Father spits in that tone that always used to terrify me. It still makes me tense, but only for a split-second, and then I melt into Dion’s side.

I rest my hand on my husband’s knee and smile. “Father. I’m glad to see you’re doing well after that unfortunate robbery.”

He hasn’t spoken up about what happened, and I can only imagine it’s because Dion threatened him. The official story seems to be that he was involved in a violent robbery. I never asked Dion about it, because truthfully, I didn’t want to know the exact details.

Perhaps I should’ve felt some remorse, but when I read the news, all I felt was relief. All of a sudden, this man that had such an uncontrollable hold over me no longer seemed untouchable.

“*Robbery*,” he repeats, fury blazing in his eyes. He takes a step toward me, but Theo places a hand on his shoulder and squeezed tightly. Father’s expression transforms from anger to pain, and it’s a fascinating sight to see. I’ve never felt so numb looking at him. When was the last time he stood in front of me without inciting fear in me?

“It’s one thing to touch me, but it’s something else entirely to touch my mines. You’re insane if you think you can pin it on me. I’ve been accused of insurance fraud because of you. You will not get away with this.” He grits his teeth, his anger so vehement that he’s shaking. “Here is what will happen. You will pay me twice the amount of damage you caused, and I will continue to feign ignorance about my injuries.”

I stare at him blankly while Dion plays with my hair, his attention entirely on me. I don’t think he’s even looked at my father yet, and it’s clear that it’s unnerving Father.

“I’m not walking out of here without a written agreement. Fail to meet my terms, and I’ll go talk to The Herald. They’d love to hear all about how the Windsor brothers rounded me up and beat me, one by one, taunting me as they told me about the bombs they placed in my mines. You will never get away with this.”

Dion sighs and gently brushes the back of his hand over my cheek. “There’s evidence of your father buying those bombs,” he tells me. “Courtesy of our favorite Kingston brother. Just thought you should know that. Even if he talks, there’s a paper trail leading directly to him. It’ll just sound like he’s trying to frame and exploit us. If you want to talk to the press, we can spin the story so he’s outed for the abusive, controlling asshole he is, and every single word he utters will just be another stone pulled from his foundation, until it all comes tumbling down on him. As for his injuries? There’s a huge paper trail proving his countless debts. You don’t need to fear the press, Faye. No one will believe him.”

I look into my husband’s eyes, surprised he managed to cover all his bases. He’s right. No matter what my father says, with Windsor Media on our side, we can push whatever agenda we want, even if the other half of the media spins a different tale. A thrill runs down my spine, and I smile involuntarily. I’ve never thought of myself as a vicious person, but it feels good to no longer be powerless.

Dion continues to stroke my hair, as though he couldn’t care less about my father’s threats. “What do you think, Faye? I’ll do whatever you want me to do. You don’t need to worry about the miners either, Windsor Enterprises offered all of them jobs.”

I nod and steel my spine as I turn back toward my father. Years of pain and humiliation, of tearing me down and bending me to his will, only for him to end up standing in my living room, at my mercy.

“I think your kindness was wasted on my father,” I murmur. “It’s clear he doesn’t value his life, so why should we?”

Dion chuckles, the sound a low rumble that brings a smile to my own face. He looks at me with such pride that I can’t manage to hold his gaze.

“Dion, I don’t want to see him anymore. Not ever again. I’m tired of being threatened and exploited. If we give in now, then where does it end? I can’t do this anymore.”

He nods before leaning in and pressing a sweet kiss to my forehead. “Understood,” he says.

His gaze is ruthless when he pulls away, pure venom dancing in his eyes. It's odd, that duality. The man he is with me is so different to the version the rest of the world gets.

"You heard my wife. Get him out of our house, and out of our lives. Give him a chance to run, but if he doesn't heed my words and attempts to appear in front of my wife ever again, remove him *permanently*."

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Chapter Fifty-Nine

DION

I tap my finger against the table in the conference room, my gaze on the shitty London weather. I should be at home with my wife, but instead, I'm here, negotiating some bullshit deal for Sierra. Why the fuck does she need to buy an office block here anyway?

"I'm afraid we can't accept your offer, but perhaps we can meet somewhere in the middle?" the CEO of the development firm tells me. Maggie? Margaret? What was her name again? "Might I suggest we reconvene tomorrow? Perhaps we can discuss this more over dinner."

The way she looks at me irritates me. I never used to mind it — if anything, I'm quite accustomed to charming my way into great deals. But that was before Faye. Now, all I can think about is the disappointed frown she'd have on her face if I smiled back at the lady in front of me.

I rise to my feet and sigh. "No," I say simply. "I'm sorry to hear you don't find our offer acceptable. Though Windsor Enterprises would have loved to work with you, it appears that won't be possible at this time."

I offer her my hand to shake, and she stares at it with mild panic. It's obvious she expected me to entertain some ridiculous back and forth before finally agreeing to the price I've offered, but I don't feel like indulging her.

I haven't been able to stop thinking about Faye. She seemed fine when I left, but I know her father showing up at our house left her rattled. I noticed her double checking the doors and windows a few times, and she seems

easily startled. It's like she's expecting some kind of retaliation from Jimmy, and I want to be there to put her at ease.

Mathilda? Marjory? *What's-her-name* shakes my hand reluctantly while I ignore my secretary's displeased gaze. What's the point of being a billionaire if I can't even go home to my wife whenever I want? Hell, I only do this job out of duty to my family, and I know they'd understand. Sierra isn't going to care if she misses out on this office block — unless Xavier snaps it up instead. I'll just have to make sure he doesn't needle her unnecessarily. Getting a reaction out of her seems to entertain him endlessly, perhaps because he doesn't have a sister of his own. He needs to knock it off before he finds out the hard way just how psychotic baby sisters can be.

"Dion," Maria says as I walk out. I sigh as I glance back at her, already annoyed when she's barely spoken a word yet. "She would've come round, and you know it. This is a great deal. Sierra isn't going to be pleased if she hears you backed out of this without good reason."

I raise a brow and clench my jaw, irritation running down my spine. "Since when do I work for my sister? And at what point did you gather the courage to speak on her behalf like you know her at all?"

Maria blinks and shakes her head. "I didn't mean it that way," she says hesitantly. "It just feels like you're walking out of these negotiations prematurely."

"Last I checked, that was my call to make. I don't recall second-guessing my decisions being part of your job spec." She falls silent as my driver holds the car door open for us, her expression guarded. "Look, Maria. I appreciate you as an employee, I truly do. But you need to understand this is not a partnership."

Sometimes, she acts like we're Luca and Val, and we will *never* be like them. Theirs has always been a true partnership, both at work and outside of it, but the boundaries between Maria and me have never blurred — not on my part, anyway.

"You've changed," she says, her voice soft, disappointed.

I lean back and glance out the window. "I should hope so," I tell her. "I've never felt more like *myself* than I do these days. I'm no longer going through the motions, obsessed with work merely because it was an escape. You have no idea, Maria. I used to love going to sleep more than anything, because it meant a few hours of peace on nights my nightmares would spare

me. Now? Now I'm scared I'll blink and miss a moment I want to commit to memory. When I married Faye, I told her I'd start counting my blessings, because that's what I thought each day with her would be — a blessing. I didn't realize how true those words would turn out to be."

She looks so pained that I feel bad for a moment, but it fades quickly. I'm tired of feeling guilty, especially about something so beautiful as my love for Faye.

"You're in love with her," she says, her tone bitter.

"Hopelessly so," I admit.

"Does she feel the same way?"

I smirk then, my heart overflowing with happiness. "Yes. I believe she does."

Maria smiles back at me, though it doesn't reach her eyes. "Do you know what hurts the most? I've been trying to make you smile like that for years now, and the mere memory of her does what I never could. I just thought… if I just waited long enough, once your three years with her passed, then maybe you'd finally look at me."

Regret washes over me, and I force myself to look her in the eye. I suspected she had feelings for me, but I'd hoped she'd get over them once I got married. I've never given her hope, or even any indication that I was interested in her at all, because I'm not. I never have been.

"I'm sorry," I tell her. "I love my wife more than anything, and that won't ever change. If I have ever done anything to make you believe otherwise, then I sincerely apologize."

She shakes her head. "No," she murmurs. "You never have. You've never been anything but perfectly professional." She pulls a hand through her hair and sighs. "Thank you, Dion. I just needed to hear that."

I nod, uncertain what else to say. She's been a great team member, and I'd hate for this to change anything between us, but I know it's inevitable. "My offer still stands," I tell her. "I'd hate to lose you as my secretary, but if you wish to leave, I'll write you a glowing letter of recommendation."

The smile she throws my way seems genuine, and it takes the edge off my discomfort. She's stood by me for years, both as a secretary and friend, and I'd hate for her to feel entirely unvalued simply because I can't return her feelings.

"I think I'm ready to take you up on that offer," Maria says, her tone carrying a hint of relief.

“I’ll spend our entire flight writing it for you.”

And I do, though I do it with great difficulty. It’s almost as though I’m being punished for ditching work and running home to my wife, because the amount of turbulence that hits us on the way back is positively sickening. It isn’t enough to wipe the smile off my face, though.

No. That doesn’t happen until I walk into our house and find it empty.

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Chapter Sixty

DION

My gut tells me something is wrong when I find room after room empty, not a trace of my darling wife to be found. I've been texting her incessantly, so she would've told me if she had plans for the evening that involved her leaving home, right?

I can't temper my restless heart as I call her, impatience making me pace our living room. She picks up after two rings.

"Dion! Isn't it super late for you right now?"

She sounds excited to speak to me, her tone the same as usual. "Couldn't sleep," I lie. "What are you up to, darling?"

She sighs, and I vaguely hear something that sounds like the rustle of sheets, but she definitely isn't in *our* bed. My heart begins to pound wildly as nausea hits me hard.

"Nothing much. Sierra told me about this movie she loved, so I thought I might watch it and snuggle up on the sofa. What about you? What happened? Did you have a nightmare?"

I fall silent, unsure how to respond. She's acting like she's at home, when she isn't. So where is she? My mind begins to play tricks on me, showing me images of her with Eric, and all of a sudden, I see all of my business trips through fresh eyes.

Me being away so often would've given her enough time to maintain a relationship with him if she wanted. Her bodyguards are instructed to

protect her, not to report her every action to me. I didn't want to control her the way her father did, but perhaps I should have.

"Yeah, a nightmare," I murmur. "Hey, you know what? I think I'll try to go back to bed. I'll speak to you later, alright?"

"That's probably a good idea. Dream of me," she says, her tone light. "I love you. Night!"

"I love you, too," I murmur, before ending the call, the words feeling empty. If I hadn't been standing in our house, I'd have believed she was right where she's pretending to be. How many times has she deceived me?

I stare at my phone, uncertain whether I want to know. If I pursue this and learn something I never wanted to know, things will never be the same again. I could just remain ignorant and hold onto this illusion of happiness, but would I ever stop wondering?

I bite my lip and call Silas, my mind made up. "Where is she?" I ask the moment he picks up.

"Dion," he says, his tone hesitant. "I wasn't informed that you'd be returning ahead of schedule. I'd have handled the border security clearance for you if you'd let me know."

He's deflecting. "Answer me," I snap. "Where is my wife?"

Silas sighs. "It's nothing like what you're imagining, Dion. I'm just worried you wouldn't understand. If she'd been doing anything immoral, I'd have told you."

"I want an address within the next three minutes," I warn him, before ending the call. I'm not interested in convincing him to do his goddamn job. Thankfully, he doesn't fuck around and gets me exactly what I asked for.

It takes me nearly two hours, but eventually, I find myself standing in front of a small wooden cottage in a tiny suburb I've never even heard of. So this is where she is, huh? I stare at the front door, still apprehensive. What will I find when I walk in here? Am I really sure I want to know?

I lift my hand to the doorbell, hesitating for a moment before pressing it. My heart is in my throat as I wait for the door to open. It's almost as though a small part of me is still hoping that I'm wrong, that I won't find her here.

But then the door opens, and there she is, standing in front of me in the same deep blue silk robe Raven gifted her. I have a matching one at home — *our home.*

Her eyes widen, and I watch as panic sets in. My darling wife tries to close the door on me, and a soft huff escapes my lips as I stop her and force

my way in. “It’s lovely to see you too, angel,” I murmur.

She stumbles back, her gaze roaming over the hallway. I don’t have to proceed any further to know she designed this place herself. Her signature touch is in every last detail, right down to the wall paneling and the same gold shade she chose for the fixtures in our house.

“D-Dion,” she whispers, her hand raised to her chest. “W-what are you doing here? How did you find this place?”

She takes another step back when I move closer to her, and I grit my teeth as I brush past her, walking further into the cottage. It’s adorable and finished to an incredibly high standard. It would’ve taken her months to decorate this.

“I think the more apt question is what are *you* doing here?”

I walk into the living room, relieved to find it empty. Just as she’s told me, she appeared to have been watching a movie. A soft fuzzy blanket is thrown over a comfortable looking cream fabric sofa, the interior far more rustic than our house. My eyes pause on the picture frames scattered throughout the living room — all of Faye and her mother. There isn’t a single one of us.

I move toward the armchair in the corner and sit down on it, anger and pain warring for dominance right below the surface. I tempter my emotions and take a deep breath. “What is this place?”

Faye stands in front of me, her arms wrapped around herself. “It isn’t what you think,” she murmurs.

I laugh mirthlessly. “Famous last words.” I run a hand through my hair, only to find that I’m shaking. I hadn’t realized. “Explain, Faye. And so help me God, you’d better have a good explanation. Are you here alone?”

“I… yes. I’m here alone,” she tells me, her gaze downcast, as though she can’t quite face me.

“Are you waiting for someone? Faye, are you having an affair?”

Her head snaps up and she inhales sharply. “No,” she instantly denies. “Of course not. This… this place… it’s mine.”

I grip my hair tightly and take a steadying breath. “I’m going to need more details than that, darling. I’m trying, I swear, but *fuck*, I’m going to need you to give me a proper explanation.”

She nods, and I notice the way she trembles, the way she can’t meet my eyes for more than a few seconds at a time. “I bought this house with the money I earned from my concerts. I just… I just wanted to have a place that

was completely my own. Somewhere I could go sometimes, a home that no one could ever take away from me."

I swallow my devastation and nod, trying my hardest to understand, to be patient. "Were you ever going to tell me? You pretended to be home when I called you, Faye. Do you have any idea what it was like to be standing in our home while you lied to me?"

Guilt and remorse flicker through her beautiful fucking eyes. "Yes," she lies. "I would've told you eventually, I just couldn't find the right time."

I look around, taking in the care she put into each and every aspect of this home, and it fucking hurts. To me, this is no less of a betrayal. "Do you understand how fucked up it is for my wife to have a secret house she can escape to? Because that's what this is, isn't it? It's an escape plan. You were never going to tell me."

"Dion, I'm so incredibly sorry." Her voice breaks on the last word, and she looks like she means it, but it isn't enough. And that's the problem, isn't it? I'll never be enough. "I don't know how to explain in a way that'd make you understand, but I'll try. It isn't… it's not because of you, personally. I just… I just always wanted a home of my own. Somewhere I'd always be safe, where I could go if I ever felt unwanted anywhere else."

"What about the home we built together, Faye? The home you decorated all by yourself? That place where you play my mother's piano, where you let me fuck you into the couch, where we wake up together? What about that place? Isn't that your home? *Our* home?"

"It… it's yours," she whispers. "If… if you ever left me, or if… if you ever hurt me…"

I lean forward and bury my face in my hands, my head buzzing. I thought I knew what heartbreak felt like — thought I'd lived with it for years. I was wrong. "What more can I do?" I ask, my voice breaking. "Faye, what more can I do to prove to you that I'm in this for the long haul? How do I make you feel safe with me? I would *never* hurt you. Surely you know that?"

"I… I know," she says, clearly just for my benefit.

I spent my days planning the rest of our lives, while she spent them planning her escape. I've done all I can for her — faced all my fears, pushed myself to do things I hadn't done in years. I supported her, built her up, gave her all the pieces she needed to stand independently. I did it

because I trusted that she'd stay, even if she finally had the ability to walk away.

I gambled, and I lost.

"Remember that afternoon in Rome? We were dancing in the rain, and you told me that you chose me. Every second of every day, even when I don't want you to, even on days that feel impossibly hard. Isn't that what you said?"

I watch as a tear runs down her cheek, and for a moment, I catch myself wanting to rush up to her so I can take her in my arms and take away her pain, but I don't.

"You didn't choose me, Faye. Not wholeheartedly. Not the way I need you to."

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Chapter Sixty-One

DION

I'm numb as I sit opposite Eric, unfazed by the glee in his eyes. "I always knew I'd be the one to draw up your divorce papers," he tells me, a smug smile on his face. "A few weeks before your one-year wedding anniversary, no less. You two didn't last very long at all, did you? I was so sure I'd have to wait the full three years, and I would have, you know? For her, I would have. I'm not sure how you got out of your grandmother's terms and conditions, but I'm grateful for it."

He pushes a stack of papers toward me, and I glance them over reluctantly. A few weeks ago, I'd have grabbed him by the collar and smashed his face into this godforsaken table, but today I don't have the energy for it. "She's still my wife, right until we both sign these papers, and if I have it my way, she never will." My voice is listless, all fight gone. Faye and I have barely spoken since I walked out of her cottage. She followed me home, but nothing she could say would justify her actions.

The worst part is I don't even blame her. Not truly. I'm not hurt that she wanted a place of her own — I'd have fully supported that if she'd just *told* me. I'm hurt that she felt the need to keep something so significant hidden from me, that she felt like she needed an escape from *me*. If I keep her trapped in this marriage, she'll never be able to heal the way she deserves to. She'll always feel beholden to someone. I tried to fool myself just as I

fooled her — what I gave her was the illusion of independence, not true independence itself.

“She’ll sign,” Eric says. “She never wanted you, Dion. It was me she was dating while she was engaged to you. She held onto me until the very last second, and you know it. I never stopped waiting for her, and now I’ve finally got a real shot with her. I won’t waste it.”

My expression hardens as images of her on Eric’s arm flash through my mind. He’d have her smiles, her little sighs as she tries to figure out the next notes when she’s composing, her moans as she comes.

“Even if she does give you another chance, you’ll never have all of her. She’ll compare you to me every single day, and you’ll *never* be able to measure up. You can’t book out The Louvre for her so she can see the Mona Lisa in peace, like I did a few weeks ago. Nor can you buy orchestra halls, so she’ll be able to hold her concerts in the best places in the city with little notice. Do you even know what she needs after a long day, or what to do if she can’t sleep? Would you be able to protect her the way I can?”

I shake my head, a cruel smile making its way onto my face. “Even if she’s with you, the whole world will remember her being *mine*. Even if *you* could, no one else will let you forget.” A dark chuckle escapes my lips as my eyes meet his. “And you won’t, will you? You’ll never forget the way she took my cock in her dressing room, or how desperate she was for it. She *loved* it. Did you know we took your roses home that day? She spread the petals on our bed and asked me to fuck her on top of them. One of my best memories, so thank you for that.”

He looks stricken, and I don’t feel even remotely better. The truth is I’d give her my blessing if this is what it takes for her to be happy. Faye deserves it more than anyone.

“Dion, I don’t care if the whole world thinks of her as your ex-wife, so long as I’m the one by her side. As for everything else? Well, thanks for teaching her things I’m sure to enjoy.”

I lunge for him and grab his tie, yanking him closer. He stumbles onto the conference table, fear flashing through his eyes for a moment. This. This is why Faye felt the need to have an escape plan. Because she saw the monster that lurks in my shadows.

I let go of him and take a shaky breath as I run a hand through my hair, my heart fractured beyond repair. “She likes chamomile tea after a long day,” I murmur eventually. “So I keep dried chamomile flowers in the

house, just for her. And when she can't sleep, she likes to compose. She'll hide out in the living room and hum tunes as her mind works through the notes. She likes input though, so if you can give it to her, she'll appreciate it. That's how you can get her to fall back asleep on rough nights."

Eric stares at me wide-eyed, and I offer him a shaky smile. "I love her, Eric. With all I've got, all I am. Offering her a divorce has nothing to do with you. I'm doing it because she deserves to finally be free and independent, but if my choice leads her back to you… then you'd better make sure you love her more than I do. Treat her better, love her harder, be the man I could never be. All those things I can give her that you can't? That's just money. I'll give her enough, so that won't matter."

He nods at me hesitantly, clearly shaken by both my actions and my words. Truthfully, so am I. I can't stop thinking of Faye with Eric as I walk to my car, my heart aching. When I requested the divorce papers, he hadn't even been much of a consideration — I'd done it because it's the right thing to do.

"Mr. Windsor," Garret says as he holds the door open for me. I shake my head when it looks like he's got something to say to me, only to freeze when I sit down.

"Hi, Dion," Grandma says.

I see. So that's what Garret had tried to warn me about. I sigh and buckle myself in, feeling sick to my stomach. If she knew the second I stepped foot into our lawyer's office, then she must have known about Faye's cottage. How many people knew?

"I'm not here to scold you," she says, her voice soft. Grandma places her hand on my knee and squeezes, a sweet smile on her face. "I'm just here to tell you that I'll support you no matter what. I learned my lesson with Ares and Luca, and I won't make the same mistakes with you. If this is what you want, then I'll stand by your decision. The only thing I'll ask for is your forgiveness."

I place my hand over hers and interlace our fingers. "There's nothing to forgive, Grandma. Nothing at all."

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Chapter Sixty-Two

FAYE

I look up when Dion walks into the house, his eyes instantly finding mine. Normally, I'd have walked over, and he'd have met me halfway. I'd have risen to my tiptoes, and he'd have swept me off my feet outright as he kissed me.

Today we just stare at each other, neither of us sure what to say. I've tried to explain, but my words sound hollow to me too. It comes down to trust, and he's right. I didn't trust him as much as I led him to believe.

I never should've hidden the cottage from him, but I couldn't help it. It was mostly instinctual, but would I have done that if I truly trusted him not to hurt me — if I trusted that I'd never need that cottage because of *him*?

"Can we talk?" he asks, his voice soft. Dion looks tired, haunted. This is what he used to look like before our marriage. Did I do this to him? To us?

I nod and follow him to the dining table, my heart racing. I've never been uneasy around him, but I am now. It isn't fear, per se, but perhaps apprehension?

He stares down at a brown envelope on the table and inhales deeply before pushing it my way. When his gaze meets mine, pure heartbreak is what I'm met with. "For you," he whispers.

I take the envelope with trembling hands and open it carefully, a chill running down my spine when I realize what I'm looking at. I drop the papers to the table, almost like they scalded me.

“You’ve already signed these,” I murmur, a hint of betrayal making its way into my voice.

Dion nods. “It was unfair for me to say you deserve a choice without actually giving you one, Faye. Throughout our entire marriage, you’ve been trying to make the best of this situation. We can tell ourselves whatever we’d like, but ultimately, neither of us ever had a choice. The cottage? I see it for what it is. It was the manifestation of your need for independence, and a fail-safe that you never should’ve needed. I don’t fault you for it, baby, nor do I blame you. I wish… I wish I’d been able to eliminate that need altogether, but I understand why that might not have been possible given our circumstances.”

“I will never sign this, Dion.” For a split-second, hope surges in his eyes, but he puts the flames out instantly. “I agree I messed up, and I should’ve told you. I also agree it’s messed up that even a small part of me thought I might ever need that cottage at all, but Dion…” I run a hand through my hair, unable to justify the desperation that lives inside me, the fear that’s always just below the surface. How do I explain that I always feel like what we have can’t last? That it’s too good to be true? “I won’t sign. I won’t divorce you.”

He inhales deeply and pinches the bridge of his nose. “Neither of us wanted this,” he murmurs. “There’s a good reason I’ve been running from you for so long, Faye. It isn’t just your age. It’s because you’re a stark reminder of every single one of my fears, every hint of guilt that keeps me up at night. Do you have any idea how hard it is to watch you play my mother’s piano? To hear you talk about her foundation? You and I… we were never meant to be together.”

I rise from my chair and walk around the table. “You don’t mean that.” He stares at me with such desperation, like he wants nothing more than to undo the pain I’ve caused, but if there’s one thing we’ve both learned the hard way, it’s that deep wounds always leave scars.

I place my hands on his shoulders, hesitating for only a moment before I straddle him and seat myself in his lap. “Look at me,” I murmur. “I love you, Dion. I know it doesn’t feel that way right now, but I do. I’ll sell the cottage, alright? We can just get rid of it. I wasn’t thinking clearly when I bought it, and I… I don’t need it. I just need you, Dion. Only you.”

He sighs and reaches for me, his touch gentle as he brushes my hair out of my face. I inhale sharply when he cups my cheek and leans in, his lips

brushing against mine. My eyes fall closed when he kisses me, his touch the same as always — reverent, patient, cautious.

I moan when he deepens our kiss, and my hands push into his hair, desperate for more. I never wanted to hurt him, and I don't know how to make this better. How do I make him understand something I can't quite grasp myself?

I push a hand underneath his shirt, and he groans as he rises from his seat to place me on top of our dining table. His knee moves between my legs to push them apart, and then he's pulling me closer, his hands roaming over my body. "Please," I whisper, unsure of what I'm pleading for exactly.

Dion's hand disappears between my legs just as I undo his belt buckle, and he moans when he realizes I'm wet. Just one single kiss, and I'm a needy mess for him. "*Please*."

"Use your words, baby," he orders as he pushes my underwear aside and eases a finger into me. "What do you want?"

"You," I whisper. "I want you to love me. Tell me the papers are a joke, and that you'll always want me the same."

His expression hardens, and his free hand wraps into my hair. He pulls my lips to his roughly, his grip on my hair tight. I moan when his tongue brushes against mine, and he pushes another finger into me. He knows exactly how to tease me, how to get me to the edge without giving me what I want.

My hand wraps around his cock, and Dion drops his forehead to mine. "I love you," he murmurs as I guide him into me, replacing his fingers with what I truly want. "So fucking much, Faye." He looks into my eyes as he slowly thrusts forward, inch by inch. "I will always love you, and I'll always want you the way I do right now."

"I love you too," I moan when he grabs my hips, his touch becoming rougher as he begins to move, taking me the way I wanted him to. "I'll never let you go, Dion."

"Fuck," he groans. He pulls out almost all the way and looks between us as he slides back in. "Your pussy is so hungry for me, baby. You look so fucking good taking my cock like that. I'll never tire of this."

My legs wrap around his waist as he begins to take me harder, deeper, his movements uncontrolled. I love it when he unravels like that. "More," I beg.

His hand moves between us, and he presses his thumb against my clit, swiping against it with every move. We're both frantic, emotional, as though we're both scared this is the last time we get to experience this together. "Like that?" he asks.

I nod, and he kisses me when my moans become louder, more desperate. Nothing has ever felt more right, yet so wrong at the same time. "I'm so close," I whimper.

He pulls back a little, his gaze intent as his movements become rougher, like he wants to memorize the way I look. "Come for me, baby," he orders. "Come, like the good girl you are."

And I do. There's nothing I wouldn't have done for him in that moment. My muscles constrict around him tightly, and my eyes fall closed as all my thoughts fade away, pure bliss taking over.

"Fuck," he groans as he comes moments after I do. "*Fuck*. You're incredible."

I hold on to him tightly as he drops his forehead to my shoulder, unwilling to let go. Something about the way he touched me felt too final, and I want this moment to last forever, these few seconds right before the fall.

He turns his face in and gently kisses my neck, his breath hot on my skin. "I'll move out," he murmurs, like he isn't still buried deep inside me. "I'll leave the papers here. You don't have to sign them if you truly don't want to, Faye. I hope you won't… but you deserve a choice. You've never truly stood on your own two feet, and I think it would be best if you take some time to decide what you want your life to be, who *you* would be, if not for me. Throughout our entire marriage, the power balance has been in my favor, but this is me tipping the scales."

He pulls out of me, his gaze roaming over me for a moment before he tidies his clothes and buttons his suit pants closed. "I love you," he whispers. "I love you enough to let you go when my deepest, darkest desires are begging me to tie you to me with any and every reason I can find."

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Chapter Sixty-Three

FAYE

I walk through a busy train station in Berlin, my steps leisurely while everyone around me seems in such a rush to get somewhere. This is what I desperately wanted, yet every experience in the last few weeks has felt entirely empty.

I haven't stopped thinking about Dion for even a second, but I also can't deny that it's thrilling to make choices of my own. I've never had to buy a train ticket before, nor had I ever flown by myself. Being able to choose the places I visited and the hotels I stayed in fulfilled a deep need I never knew existed. Every choice I made and every dream I chased worked to heal a deep-rooted wound, giving me a type of confidence I've never felt before.

For the first time ever, I'm just Faye. Here, where no one knows me, I'm not a famous pianist, nor am I my father's daughter, or Dion's wife. I'm just a girl no one cares about, someone who can make mistakes and get lost without being photographed or ridiculed. For the first time in my life, I don't feel like a puppet dancing to someone else's tune. There are no rules to abide by, no forced piano practice, no rearranging my schedule for someone else.

It's everything I thought I wanted, and it all falls flat without Dion. I sigh and pat my bag, the divorce papers he gave me always at the forefront of my mind. He disappeared after he told me he'd move out, and no one

would tell me where he went — all they'd tell me was that I should do as he asked, and try living for myself for once.

If I hadn't, would I always have wondered? Would a part of me always have been scared that Dion would never let me go, that he'd trap me the way my father always had? I'm ashamed to admit that it's true.

Rationally, I always knew that he wasn't like my father, but a small part of me still wondered if someday, there'd come a time I'd want to leave, and he wouldn't let me. I'd tried not to, but I'd been scared that he'd want to control me for the rest of our lives, the way he did when he cut my father out of my life without even consulting me, or when he assigned me bodyguards without informing me. Knowing he did it because it was what's best for me wasn't enough to still my fears.

Someone bumps into me, and I gasp as my entire body swivels. I don't even have a chance to snap at them before they brush past in their quest to get on a train that's likely departing soon. I sigh as I take another step forward, only to pause when my eyes land on a small piano in the corner.

My heart soars, and I smile to myself as I walk toward it. Fifteen train stations, and I'd begun to think these only existed in movies. A shiver runs down my spine as I trace over the ivories that aren't quite ivory. They're worn from use, and no doubt, this little beauty won't sound the way I'm used to, but somehow, this is a bigger dream come true than selling out a big venue.

I sit down, my touch reverent as I test out the sound. It needs tuning, but it's not so bad. How long has it been since I last sat behind a piano? It's been weeks, and I've missed it almost as much as I've missed Dion.

I begin to play absentmindedly, my eyes widening when I realize that I involuntarily chose a piece I'd composed with Dion's help. It's contemporary and far too modern compared to what I'd usually play, but it was ours.

I bite my lip as a deep regret surges within me. Weeks of chasing dreams, only to realize that the reality of us was better than my wildest fantasies. I never should've bought that cottage, and I never should've doubted Dion. I'd rather have lived with my fears for the rest of our lives than live a life he isn't part of.

The last note rings, and I immediately delve into another piece, a classical one this time, Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata* perfectly capturing my mood. Where do I begin to make this right? He told me he's been

running away from me for a reason, and I'm scared he didn't just tell me that to push me away. I'm scared it's true, and he's better off without me.

The nightmares never stopped, and though he now smiles when he hears me play the piano, there are still moments when his gaze becomes unfocused, and painful memories steal him away from me. Am I enough to make that worth it? Can I heal him the way he healed me, if I have enough time? Do I deserve to be the woman standing by his side?

Weeks worth of soul searching, of trying to determine who I want to be, only to finally realize that all I want to be is *his*.

I'm snapped out of my thoughts by applause, and I blink in confusion when I notice the strangers that surround the piano. I rise from my seat and throw them a timid smile before rushing away, feeling empty inside.

Throughout our entire marriage, a small part of me wondered what my life would be like if I hadn't married Dion. I'd known it was too late to rectify the past, but I'd wondered what it'd be like to control my own future.

Turns out, all of these experiences, all of these moments… they're empty without someone to share them with.

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Chapter Sixty-Four

DION

I stare at my wife as she boards yet another shitty budget airline flight. She's dressed in jeans and a t-shirt, her long red hair flowing down her back and a beautiful flush on her face. She's looks fucking radiant, free, *happy*. It kills me to see her this way, yet it brings me a hint of relief too.

If she hadn't bought that cottage, would I ever have realized that at least a small part of her felt trapped in our marriage? Would I have realized that she feared me, that she didn't trust me the way she wanted me to think she did?

"Look," Lex says. "I love you. I really fucking do, but enough is enough. Last week you had Zane lug some ratty ass piano through a derelict Berlin train station, and now you're making me fly this shitty ass plane?"

I throw him a glare as I join him in the cockpit. "Zane needed a distraction anyway, and I'm not convinced these planes are safe. I can't be at ease unless you're flying. Besides, this is a long-haul flight crossing a fucking ocean. I don't trust it. I don't understand why she couldn't just have chosen a big airline with newer planes."

His expression softens, and he nods as he takes his seat beside the co-pilot. Asking Lex for help meant having to admit to my fear of flying, but thankfully, he hasn't made a big deal of it. Not yet, anyway. Lex lets me triple check all settings before takeoff, not saying a word throughout.

"Ready?" he asks eventually.

I shake my head. “No, but let’s get this shit over with. At least she’s finally headed back to the States. I can do with sleeping in my own bed for a few nights.”

He nods sharply, and I brace myself for what is bound to be a horrendous flight. I really wish she’d taken the Windsor private jet — I know it’s been offered to her multiple times. I’ll never understand her need for these dreadful cheap experiences, but fuck, if this is what’ll make her happy, I’ll do what I can to make it happen.

“How long are you going to keep this up?” Lex asks once we’re at forty thousand feet.

I shake my head and look out the window. “Until I’m ready to let her go.”

He laughs and looks at me over his shoulder. “You’ll never be ready to let Faye go,” he says, sounding amused. “So I guess you’ll keep this up until she comes back home.” He falls silent for a moment, his smile melting away. “I know you *think* she looks happy, but she doesn’t, Dion. Maybe you never noticed the way she lights up around you, but I do. I agree she deserved a proper choice given the way her shitty father controlled her for most of her life, and I’m incredibly proud of you for giving her that, but Dion… she isn’t happy. Neither are you.”

I run a hand through my hair and sigh. “Two people finding solace in each other can easily convince themselves that it’s happiness they feel, when in reality, it’s comfort mixed with lust, masquerading as love. I think she’s still trying to figure out how to be by herself, and that adjustment period might not be easy for her, but she’ll get there. Faye doesn’t need me to be happy. She doesn’t need anyone.”

“Maybe,” Lex says. “But maybe she *wants* you right there with her. Maybe the happiness she’s found by herself is heightened when she’s with you. I know you’re expecting the worst, but I think my sister-in-law will pleasantly surprise you.”

It’s near impossible to suppress the hope his words make me feel, and I force myself to look away. I know she hasn’t signed the papers yet, but I’m scared that’s what she’s coming back for. I’m terrified that a taste of freedom made her want to cut all ties with me. I couldn’t even blame her for it if I tried.

Every aspect of her life so far has been carefully orchestrated to suit my own — whether I had anything to do with that doesn’t matter. She’s given

me her past, and I'm not entitled to her future. I want her to choose me, but I won't stand in her way if she doesn't.

As expected, this truly was a flight from hell, and by the time Lex begins to prepare for landing, my nerves are racked. Yet another thing that stands between us — one of the things she loves doing most involves me facing one of my biggest fears. For us, being together means having to prioritize each other over everything, every single day. It means sacrifice and compromise, and I can't help but wish things could be easier, for us both. Despite it all, I wouldn't change a thing. I'd get on a thousand of these flights if she asked me to. She deserves that much, and more.

"Breathe," Lex tells me when we hit the ground. "We just need to taxi to the gate now. Nearly there."

I nod, feeling sick. I haven't been able to rest for even a single moment. My thoughts won't let me. I can't help but wonder where she'll go now that she's back. Will she come back home, or will she go to her cottage? The first few days, she tried to contact me constantly, but now, the missed calls are few and far between. Even her text messages slowly started coming in less frequently, until they stopped entirely. I wanted her to have some time to herself, entirely independent of my influence, but I didn't expect it to be so easy for her to get over me.

"Dion," Lex says, his tone tense as we walk out into the arrival gate. My gaze roams over the people eagerly awaiting the passengers that were on our flight, only for my heart to sink when I see Eric standing there with a large bouquet of red roses.

I lean back around the corner, out of view, my gaze on him. I watch as she walks out and sees him, her expression lighting up the way it used to for me. She walks toward him, and I turn around to walk away.

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Chapter Sixty-Five

DION

The house feels more empty than ever before when I walk in, every single detail reminding me of her. When I asked her to take charge of the interior design, I'd done it as a way of extending her an olive branch. I'd wanted to show I cared for her opinion, and that while I might not have treated her all that well in the past, that would be different once we were married.

I never expected it to bite me in the ass. How the fuck am I supposed to live in a home that reminds me of her this much? My heart is beating an unsteady rhythm as I sink into the sofa, her blue robe strewn over the back of it. The mere sight of it soothes me for a split-second, only for me to be reminded of the way she smiled at Eric.

He'd been waiting for her. She hasn't even tried to call me in days now, but she must have spoken to him, or he wouldn't have known to expect her. I bring her robe to my face and breathe her in — it's the closest I've had her in weeks, and it isn't nearly enough.

She must be with him now. If that smile she gave him was any indication, staying to watch for even a second longer would've torn me apart. It'd have done irreparable damage to whatever is left of my heart. After everything we've been through, all the ways I thought we'd grown, all the promises we made… it's still him she called.

Perhaps I was foolish not to seriously consider him when I had those divorce papers drawn up. I'd been worried about her mental health and the

security she felt in our marriage, but I hadn't doubted her in that way. If I had, I'm not sure I would've had the strength to offer her a divorce.

It's odd how quickly my need to destroy Eric is tempered by the mere memory of her smile. If he makes her smile like that for the rest of his life, fuck. If he can do that for her, I'll sit back and watch from the shadows as she moves on with life, with the man she's wanted all along.

I should've seen it that day in The Lacara. She went against every instinct, defied every one of her fears and the very essence of her upbringing, for *him*. Faye was so obviously terrified, but she still chose to be there with him.

Over time, I let myself believe it was about control, about defiance, but here I am… on the sidelines, while she's with him. Again. I should've known. Fuck, I should've known. I never deserved her in the first place.

I inhale shakily and tighten my grip on her robe as I try my hardest to keep my thoughts from wandering, but I can't help it. My eyes fall closed, and I think of her in that cottage of hers, where she doesn't share a single meaningful memory with me. There isn't even a trace of me. It was her fresh start; her escape. That's probably where she's taken him.

I sigh when I hear the front door open, not ready to deal with the support my brothers will want to offer me. They'll try to make me forget, and I don't want to. Even if it hurts, I want whatever I can get of her.

"Dion."

My head snaps up at the sound of her voice, my eyes widening. I rise from the sofa, certain I'm seeing things. "Faye?" I take in the huge bouquet of red roses she's holding, and that blazing fire in her eyes. The edges of her lips turn up into a smile, and she raises a brow when she notices I'm holding her robe. I drop it instantly and run a hand through my hair. "You must be here for the papers."

For a moment, my vicious streak nearly takes over, and I'm tempted to ask her if her boyfriend won't have her while she's still legally tied to me. Then I consider telling her she's still my wife, and that I won't let her go to him. But in the end, all I do is stare at her, pure helplessness rendering me silent.

"Dion, I did something I deserve to be punished for," she says, her voice soft, hesitant.

She might as well have stabbed me in the heart and twisted the knife. I'd rather that than stand here and listen to her telling me she cheated on

me, that he kissed her, that he's waiting for her outside.

"Just sign," I whisper. "I don't want to hear it, Faye. Just sign the papers."

She takes a step toward me, and it takes all of me to keep standing here instead of pulling her closer and begging for another chance. I'm so tempted to fall to my knees and promise that I'll be better, that I'll keep trying until I'm worthy of her.

"I spoke to Eric," she says, taking another step closer. I look away, my entire body reacting to his name being on her lips. I wish I could wipe her mouth and kiss her until she forgets who he is. I once threatened to fuck him out of her, and damn, I wish I could.

"Do you remember what you promised me shortly after we got married?" she asks, standing so close that merely shifting my body would have her pressed against me. Faye rests her palm on my chest, and I take a shaky breath. "You promised me you'd leave a kiss mark on my skin for every word I said to him. I counted."

Hope rushes through me, and my eyes find hers. She smiles at me, and this smile is different from the one she gave him. This is the one that's only ever been mine — it's filled with love, trust, and a deep kind of passion that I hope she's only ever shown me. "What did you say to him?" I ask, almost scared to voice the question.

Her hand slides up, until it's wrapped around the back of my neck. I close the distance between us, so her chest touches mine, and her bouquet falls to the floor. "He showed up with a big bouquet of roses and asked me for another chance. I replied saying, *I'm sorry, Eric. I'm still married, and I intend for it to remain that way. I choose him. After everything, despite everything, I choose him. I always will.* It was twenty-eight words, my love. I know you have a newfound fondness for roses, so I brought them for you. Perhaps you can use them when you punish me."

I grab her hair and bend down to kiss her, relief rushing through me when she moans in delight the moment my lips meet hers. Faye tightens her grip on me, and I lift her into my arms. "I love you," she murmurs in between kisses. "I'm sorry, Dion. I'm so sorry. I'll never leave again, no matter what happens."

I push her against the wall, and her head falls back, her eyes on mine. "I won't let you, angel. Please understand that I gave you a chance to run from me, to give into your fears. I will never allow you that luxury again. You

came back to me of your own volition, and I will *never* let you go again. This is it, Faye. Until we're gray and old. Tell me you want that too."

"I do. I want all of you."

I grin as I carry her to our bedroom, my restless heart finally at ease. She came back home. To *me*.

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Chapter Sixty-Six

FAYE

Dion and I stroll along the same beach in Hawaii where we shared so many of our firsts, and I can't help but smile at the way we've come full circle. He holds my hand in his, his grip tight, like he never wants to let go.

"Faye," he murmurs, pausing on the deserted private beach. I turn toward him and raise my brow when I find him looking at me with distinct worry in his eyes. He lets go of my hand and takes a step back, and then he grins as he drops down to one knee.

My lips pop open in surprise, and he chuckles as he pulls a black ring box out of his pocket. "I've been carrying this around for weeks, unable to figure out what the right place or time would be to ask you one of the most important questions that'll ever leave my lips. I thought of asking you at any of the countless places on your bucket list, or even in the home we built together despite all the odds, but in the end, right here seemed most appropriate. Here, in the place I kissed you for the very first time, when I realized I wanted to marry *you* — not because I had to, but because I wanted your smiles and your time, and the way your eyes blaze when I wind you up."

He opens the ring box to reveal a stunning engagement ring that obviously is a bespoke Laurier piece. "This was my mother's," he says, his voice faltering for a moment. "For years, I avoided every mention of her, but just being with you takes away the pain. You turned me into a better

man than I'd ever hoped to be, one she'd be *proud* of. I know that we're already married, darling, but I'd still like to promise you that I'll continue to work hard on everything that makes a marriage work — I'll communicate when the words are lodged in my throat, compromise when it goes against my very nature, and if you'll have me, I'll continue to support and stand by you. I want nothing more than to be your partner in every way, for as long as you'll have me. Please, Faye. Will you let me love you for the rest of our lives? Will you marry me?"

I sink down to my knees in front of him and grab his face, tears burning in my eyes. "Only if you'll let me prove to you that you're all I want, that I'll choose you no matter what, that I'll stay when things get rough, and that I'll trust you even when my fears and upbringing attempt to rule me. I'll marry you all over again if you let me show you just how easy you are to love, how honored and lucky I am to be your wife."

His forehead drops to mine, and he draws a shaky breath. "I will," he promises. "It isn't always easy for me to believe that you love me the way you say you do, but I'm willing to work on being better as a couple, and as a person. There's no one I'd rather walk this path with, Faye. Only you."

I grin at him as a tear runs down my face. "Then… *yes*. Yes, Dion. I'll marry you a thousand times over."

His hands shake so hard that he nearly drops the ring, and we both laugh, this moment feeling so very real, so very perfect. I stare at the antique diamond, deep gratitude settling deep in my chest. *I won't let you down*, I silently promise the previous bearer. *We're not quite where we want to be, but we're healing every day, and whatever happens, we'll face it together. Just like you intended us to.*

Dion cups my face and kisses me tenderly underneath the moonlight, stars twinkling above us. My hand wraps into his hair, and he chuckles when I push him onto his back.

"This resort… did you book it out?"

He lies back in the sand, messing up his neat shirt and trousers. I've never seen him look so relaxed before. "Yes. There's no one here. It's just us."

I grin at him as I begin to undo the buttons of his shirt. "Then let me show you what I wanted to do that night I spilled champagne all over your chest." His gaze darkens when his shirt falls open, and I lean in, softly

kissing his abs. He instantly hardens underneath me, and pure pleasure blooms in my chest. “Let me show you how much I love being your wife.”

Dion moans when I leave a trail of kisses down his torso, his hand wrapping in my hair when I place my hand on his belt. “You’re driving me insane,” he whispers. “I’ll never get enough of you, you know that? For the rest of our lives, I’ll want you the way I do tonight. You’re the one for me, Faye Windsor.”

I smile at him as I free his cock, enjoying the way I’ve got him lying in the sand, moonlight shining down on us. “I love you,” I tell him as his hands tug at my clothes, until he’s got me straddling him naked. The way he looks at me will never get old. No one has ever made me feel the way he does — it’s like I’m his biggest dream come alive. “I will always love you, Dion.”

“Fuck,” he groans when I line him up against me and slowly take him in deep, until I’m seated fully on top of him. “Look at the way you’re taking my cock, baby. You’re so good at this, aren’t you?”

I blush as I begin to ride him, enjoying the way his gaze roams over my body. He always looks so pleased, so proud. No one has ever made me feel as empowered as Dion does — even in the little moments.

His hands wrap around my waist, and he begins to move with me, taking me hard even though I’m the one on top. “You’re such a good girl for me,” he murmurs. “Taking your husband’s cock in the moonlight like that.” I moan when he moves one hand between us and strokes my clit, making his thumb brush past it with every move. “You’ll come for me, won’t you?”

I nod when his movements become rougher, deeper, faster. “*Please*.”

He smirks, his gaze caressing my body. I’ve never felt so beautiful, so wanted. Not even in my wildest dreams did I think I’d find myself riding Dion Windsor, the two of us hopelessly in love with each other. We shouldn’t work — I love to travel, and he hates to fly. I play the piano, and the sound of it brings forth his worst fears. I can’t stand being controlled, and it’s in his nature to be domineering. We don’t fit together, yet we’re perfect together because we’ve made it so, because we’re willing to work on *us*.

“You’re so fucking beautiful, Faye,” he moans. “Tell me you’re mine, baby. Say the words, and I’ll make you come.”

I bite down on my lip, intent on making him wait for it, and he grins as he swipes his thumb over my clit. “I’m yours,” I moan, desperately.

“Good girl,” he whispers. “And I’m yours, so take from me what you need.”

I ride him harder, and he keeps his thumb perfectly positioned to push me closer to the edge with each tilt of my hips. “Yes,” I moan, unable to take it.

He looks like he’s enchanted as I unravel, my muscles contracting around him, over and over again. “Fucking gorgeous,” he whispers, before turning us over. My body hits the sand, and he grins as he leans in, his lips brushing over my lips. “Now give me one more.”

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Chapter Sixty-Seven

DION

"This was the perfect place to propose," Mom says, smiling at me as we walk on the beach. I grin back at her, but part of me is scared of what will probably follow. Each time I think she's saying something sweet, she'll follow it up with something that makes me realize I got it all wrong. It's been that way for years, and though I know this is nothing but a dream, I suspect it won't change.

"You haven't had it easy, Dion, but you've endured so well. I'm proud of you, you know? I know mothers aren't supposed to have favorites, but you were mine. My little boy who loved the piano as much as I did, the only one of my kids that'd sacrifice playing with your toys so you could play the piano with me instead. You have no idea how much I appreciated every single one of those moments, honey. You grew up so fast, and I'm grateful for every moment I got with you. I'm even more grateful that you finally let go of guilt that was never yours to hold. Do you really think I'd have missed your first big performance? I never would have. Not in a million years. Asking me to come back sooner didn't change my plans. Instead of focusing so much on the crash, did you ever wonder if there was a flight plan we were meant to be on instead? You were not to blame, my sweet boy."

I stare at her in disbelief and reach for her. This dream feels different somehow, almost like she's really here with me this time. Maybe it's the

therapy Faye and I have been subjecting ourselves to, but this feels like more.

"I love you, Dion. I'm glad you've finally learned to love yourself, too. Faye is good for you, better than I ever could've hoped for. I've watched over the both of you every step of the way, honey, and watching you grow toward each other and make a conscious choice to heal, to free yourselves from the past in favor of the future you could have together… oh, my darling boy, you have no idea how proud you've made me. The person you've become despite everything is one I'm in awe of."

She reaches for me and rises to her tiptoes to brush a soft kiss to my forehead. "Be happy, Dion. For my sake and Faye's, but most importantly, your own. Be happy, because you deserve to be. It's all I've ever wanted for you. I love you, my sweet boy. I always will."

She takes a step back, and I panic as she begins to fade, until I'm standing on the beach all alone. "Mom?"

"Dion?" I'm startled awake and instantly reach for my wife, pulling her onto the sofa with me. She giggles and presses her face against my neck. "You fell asleep. Did I really take that long to get ready?"

I hold her tighter as a perfume I recognize wafts over me. Mom's. That's impossible. I lean in and breathe Faye in, but it isn't her.

"Dion, are you okay?" my wife asks, propping herself up on my chest to look me over. "You look a little pale."

I gently thread a hand through her crimson hair and take a steadying breath. "I dreamt of my mother," I admit. "In every dream I've had of her over the years, there's one sentence I wanted her to say, and she never did. Not until today."

"Yeah?" she murmurs, a sweet smile on her face.

"Faye, she told me she *loved* me."

Her eyes widen a fraction, and then her arms wrap around me. She hugs me tightly, and I nearly lose it there and then. Faye knows all about my dreams, and all the things my mom used to tell me in them. She understands how significant it is for me to hear her say that she's proud of me, that I deserve to be happy, and that she doesn't blame me.

I gently pat her hair, the gesture as soothing to me as it to her. “We need to go,” I murmur reluctantly. “We’ll be late for family dinner, and you know how Grandma gets.”

She nods and pushes off me before offering her hand. I grin as I take it, a tinge of unease running down my spine. There’s something Mom said that I can’t shake, and I can’t stop thinking about it on the walk to Grandma’s house.

Moments before we walk in, I decide to text Silas to ask whether he can find any old flight plans for my parents to indicate they rushed home.

“Everything okay?” Faye asks as we walk into the dining room.

I nod and squeeze her hand as I lead her to our seats. “Perfect,” I murmur, and it truly is. Our marriage was great before, but it improved by leaps and bounds once we made a conscious effort to heal past trauma and some of our dysfunctional thinking. I didn’t think things between us could get any better, but somehow, they did. I’ve never felt closer to her.

“Where’s Grandma?” Lex shouts. “I want to talk to her about the Lex-board.”

I tense and throw a glare his way. “I’m sure we’ve discussed this, Lexington. We’re not calling it the fucking Lex-board. It’s fucking embarrassing.”

Ares chuckles. “To be fair, he’s a fucking embarrassment, so it’s only fitting.”

Luca rolls his eyes, a habit he learned off his wife. “Says the man that went on national television to tell everyone about his obsession with his wife.”

Ares freezes, and Val elbows Luca. “Need I remind you of the no-fraternization policy you implemented at the company when I tried going on a date, only for you to have to repeal it when you *married* me weeks later?”

Ares holds up his hand, and Val high-fives him, throwing him a conspiratory wink. Meanwhile, Raven just shakes her head in amusement as she’s lost in conversation with Sierra about some kind of romance novel they’re reading together, and they’ve drawn my darling wife into their nonsense. From what I’m gathering, it sounds an awful lot like they’re planning to kidnap some unsuspecting author in order to get advance copies of a new book, or something like that? It’s definitely the kind of conversation I’m going to stay far away from.

Zane is the only one at the table that's eerily silent. It's to be expected, I suppose. Celeste's grand wedding plans keep landing on the front page of every magazine. We've kept the news strictly out of Windsor-owned news outlets, but there's always the other half of the media.

My phone buzzes, and I reach for it instantly when I see Silas's name pop up. A chill runs down my spine as I unlock my phone.

SILAS

No other flight plans were found, not even in the archives. The flight your parents were on was the only one they'd planned to be on. There were no deviations to their schedule.

I stare at my phone in disbelief. For years, I believed that they'd rushed home and missed some crucial checks because of me, but all along, the flight they were on was the one they'd scheduled weeks in advance.

It doesn't change anything, yet somehow, the remnants of my guilt ease, and I'm left feeling lighter than ever before.

I can't help but think back to that dream. Was that truly my mind playing tricks on me, or had I been holding onto my guilt so tightly that my mother couldn't reach me even though she tried? I'm not a superstitious man, but the way her perfume filled the living room for a few moments felt… magical.

"Kids!" Grandma says, rushing in, *late*. She's never late. What's going on? I frown as she grabs a wine glass and a spoon. "Kids!" she repeats as she taps the spoon against the glass until we all fall silent.

"I appreciate this is not our formal drawing room, and you do know I prefer to keep our dinners a safe, drama-free space, but I happen to have an announcement for you tonight that cannot wait."

Her gaze roams over the table, only to pause on Zane. *Oh, fuck*. "Zane," she says, and he tenses instantly, fury in his eyes. "Dion has been happily married for quite some time now, and it's about time you follow in Ares, Luca, and Dion's footsteps."

He shakes his head and empties his wineglass before slamming it back down to the table. "Honestly, Grandma? I really don't give a damn who I marry. You do you."

She nods sharply. "Excellent. You'll be marrying Celeste Harrison three weeks from now."

We all stare at Grandma in shock, none of us quite certain we just heard her correctly. Sierra whispers to Raven, who nods slowly, a hint of confusion in her gaze.

“Last I checked, Celeste was engaged to someone else,” I say carefully, moments before Zane rises to his feet.

“I won’t marry her,” he says, looking stricken. “Anyone but her.”

Grandma crosses her arms, a calculating look in her eyes. “You once begged to marry her, didn’t you?” she asks. “So you *will* marry her. Her family are among the best hoteliers in the world — there’s no way we can sit back and let them join hands with the Emersons.”

Zane stumbles back, a wild look in his eyes as he turns and walks out of the room. Lexington and Sierra follow him while the rest of us sit back quietly. There’s an odd understanding amongst those of us that are married. We might not always like Grandma’s actions, but somehow, she knows exactly what she’s doing. Every one of her moves is carefully calculated — including every instance where she has us believing she’s pulling back. She’ll make you believe your choices are your own, when she’s been guiding you along your path all along.

“I guess now isn’t a great time to mention that Faye and I would like to have a second wedding?”

Faye reaches for my knee and pinches me admonishingly, and I throw her a smug grin when Raven and Val instantly perk up and begin to discuss the countless ideas they have.

Grandma just throws me a sweet look, one that’s filled with love and pride. I might not always agree with her methods, but man am I grateful she brought Faye and me together.

I just hope she’s making the right call with Zane and Celeste too.

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Epilogue

DION

I stare at the golden heart-shaped locket in my hand and trace over the smooth metal in disbelief. I've been looking for this necklace for months now, fruitlessly, until I dreamt of Mom again last night.

"You can have mine," she told me. "The locket you're looking for is one half of a pair. Felicity's is lost, but mine isn't. She and I have been best friends since we were kids, you know? We were both quite cheesy kids, so her locket contained a photo of me, and mine held a photo of her. It drove your father mad with jealousy, because he had a pocket watch with my photo in it while I often wore a locket with my best friend's photo in it instead."

She grinned and reached for me, the tips of her fingers brushing over my hair. "Give my locket to Faye. It's the only thing I can give her, and I know she'd love it the way I did. You'll find it in my jewelry box."

And I did. It really was in her jewelry box. Some small part of me must have remembered that Mom had the same necklace as the one Faye's father took away from her, or my subconscious never would have led me to it.

I tighten my grip on it and walk into Faye's dressing room, oddly nervous. We've come so far, she and I, but I'd be lying if I said that all of our wounds are healed.

"Dion," she says, rising to her feet. Fuck. She's always beautiful, but that black evening gown she's wearing takes my breath away. It's one of Raven's designs, no doubt. "Are you ready?"

I nod at her dumbly, unable to tear my eyes off her. "I am, but you're not. Not yet."

I walk up to her and hold up my mother's necklace, my hand shaking ever so slightly. Faye gasps, her eyes moving between the locket and me in shock. "How?"

I smile at her as I reach around her to clasp the necklace closed. "This one isn't your mom's, unfortunately. I'm sorry, Faye. I tried, but I couldn't find hers. The one around your neck was my mother's."

She lifts it to look at it, pure awe in her gaze. "It was your mother's?" she asks, her voice trembling.

"It's one half of a friendship necklace. Open it."

She does as I tell her, and the biggest smile lights up her face when she sees a photo of our mothers together on one side, and one of just her mother on the other. "Mom had a similar photo in hers," she murmurs, sniffing as she looks up at me. "Thank you, Dion. I… I don't know what to say. Is it really okay for me to have this?"

I nod. "I checked with all of my siblings, and they all agreed that it should be yours, just as they all agreed on me proposing with Mom's engagement ring. Neither of us can undo the past, Faye, but we can work together toward a better future while honoring our past. It felt right to have a part of both of our moms with us tonight."

She rises to her tiptoes and presses a kiss to my lips, careful not to smudge her lipstick. "I love you," she whispers, her arms wrapping around my neck as she leans back a little to look at me. "Are you ready?"

I nod, and she grabs my hand as she leads me through the concert building I bought for her. My heart is beating out of control, and I hold on to her like she's my lifeline. In many ways, she truly is.

“In hindsight,” I tell her once we’re behind the stage curtains. “I don’t think I’m ready at all.”

Faye grins up at me and gently cups my cheek. “I always feel the same way too, but it’s better today, because I’ve got you with me. Just think of all the money we raised with tonight’s benefit concert, and how happy your family will be to see you on stage with me.”

I sigh and grab her chin, tipping her face up for a kiss shortly before the stagehand gestures for us to go on. “I’ll do it, for *you*,” I murmur. “For *us*.”

She nods and entwines our fingers as she pulls me onto the stage. My gaze instantly travels to my family seated in the front row, and Grandma’s eyes widen when I sit down next to Faye behind her piano. I smile at her and take in the emotion in my siblings’ eyes.

Zane has his arm wrapped around Celeste, and she smiles tightly, her entire body tense. He nods at me, looking surprisingly disarmed. The two of them have been putting on a front, but it’s clear they’re not doing well. I have faith in Grandma, but I’m not sure forcing these two together is a good idea. Celeste seems repentant, and Zane seems far more vengeful than I thought him capable of. He’s intent on destroying her, and he doesn’t seem to realize that in doing so, he’ll ruin the few parts of himself she left intact.

Faye begins to play the opening notes, and everything melts away until there’s nothing but the music and my wife. My fingers tremble for a moment before I join her, playing the duet we practiced tirelessly for weeks. Turns out, our family and network paid some insane amounts to see me play, and all of it is being donated directly to the Staccato Foundation. Faye is making both of our mothers’ dreams come true, and she does it so effortlessly.

I watch her as we play together, in perfect harmony. She’s the wife I never wanted, yet now I can’t imagine my life without her. Her broken pieces perfectly fit against mine, creating the foundation we’re building the rest of our lives on. With each brick we lay down, we build each other up. I can’t wait to see where life takes us, but I suspect countless shitty flights and beautiful melodies are in my future.

I wouldn’t have it any other way.

Want more of Dion and Faye? Download these bonus scenes from: catharinamaura.com/bonuses

- 1. Dion and Faye's second wedding
- 2. A spicy scene from their honeymoon
- 3. A scene from Ares and Raven's wedding where Dion and Faye dance more than once for the very first time - this is when he first realises how beautiful she is, and from this moment onward, there's no one but her for him (even if he won't acknowledge it)

More from Catharina Maura

- Raven and Ares's story: The Wrong Bride
- Luca and Val's story: The Temporary Wife
- Silas and Alanna's story: Bittersweet Memories

Zane and Celeste's story is coming soon!

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