



The BROKEN VOWS

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The Broken Vows

ZANE & CELESTE'S STORY

THE WINDSORS

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This one is for those of us that let loyalty blind us — those of us that let it deprive us of that which nourishes our souls. Only you can grant yourself permission to be happy.

Say yes.

Take the leap.

Follow your heart.

You deserve the happiness you so fervently wish upon others.

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Author's Note

The Broken Vows contains several themes that might be triggering for readers. However, the trigger warnings are also *major spoilers* for the story, and as such, they are listed at the back of this book. Reader discretion is strongly advised.

If you've read my work before and don't have any triggers, then I'd be beyond honored if you'd put your faith in me one more time. *The Broken Vows* contains a guaranteed *happily ever after*, and I highly recommend that you go into it blind.

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PART ONE

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The Past

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Chapter One

CELESTE

There aren't many people who I genuinely *hate* with every fiber of my being — in fact, my list is comprised of only one name: *Zane Windsor*.

The mere thought of him has my stomach clenching and my veins filling with an immobilizing dread. Zane Windsor is the bane of my existence, the person I curse in my sleep. He always has been. When I think of the most horrible parts of my childhood, it's his face that floats to the forefront of my mind. Knowing that I'll have to see him again in just a few hours is making me anxious beyond words.

"Celeste?"

I look up to find my best friend, Lily, staring at me with clear concern in her blue eyes. She tucks a stray strand of my perfectly curled hair behind my ear, her gaze filled with understanding. "It's going to be fine," she reassures me. "It's only a charity gala, and you'll be able to get so much valuable networking done. Just focus on that, okay?"

I glance at my bright yellow nails, unable to put that niggling feeling of impending doom to rest. "It's the *Windsor* annual gala," I murmur, my voice breaking. "It just feels ominous that the first event I'm attending now that I'm back is one hosted by Zane's family."

I thought that five years away at college had instilled some much needed confidence in me, only for it to evaporate the moment I stepped foot back into my childhood home.

Coming home has felt like taking ten steps back, like the girl I used to be is clawing at me, seeking to be let out of the box I locked her in. I'm terrified that being around Zane again will turn me back into the version of myself I despise, the one I'm ashamed of.

"Celeste, you are the strongest and smartest woman I've ever met. I wish you could see yourself through my eyes — perhaps then you'd realize how silly it is that a guy like Zane affects you so much. He isn't worth a second thought."

I nod, willing myself to believe her, to snap out of the hold the past has over me. She's right, of course. Zane shouldn't have so much power over me. Not anymore.

"Did I tell you that Grandpa instructed me to analyze every inch of the Windsor hotel the event is hosted at?" I ask, trying to change the topic. Talking about Zane just reminds me of the things I keep trying to forget, the secrets I've kept from her. "Do you know what he said to me?"

Lily shakes her head, a questioning look in her eyes as she touches up the highlighter she applied on my cheekbones.

"The reviews for their hotel have been stellar, but we can't gather enough information that way. They invited us, didn't they? It'd be rude not to enjoy the hotel's facilities to their fullest extent," I repeat, mocking my grandfather. "Can you believe him?"

A startled laugh escapes Lily's lips, and I can't help but smile too. It takes the sting out of the words that followed, the ones I won't tell Lily about.

"I can only hope that your education actually helped smarten you up, because I'm tired of my granddaughter coming second to that Windsor boy. You're not in school anymore, Celeste. The stakes are higher now, and there's no margin for error. At the very least, you should be able to raise our hotels to the same standard as the Windsors'."

Sometimes I wonder, would my grandfather's endless comparisons hurt less if they didn't result in him finding me lacking every single time? Would my hatred for Zane have evolved into what it is had it not been fueled by Grandpa's expectations?

To say that Zane and I were rivals growing up would be putting it mildly. Perhaps that's what it started as, back at kindergarten — mere childish rivalry, a natural result of the feud between our families. Yet

throughout the years, it grew into pure enmity and a hatred so profound that I sought an escape, a reprieve. One that has now come to an end.

“Your grandfather is ridiculous sometimes, honestly,” Lily says, a hint of concern buried in her voice. Every once in a while, it’s like she sees the pain I keep hidden, even when I try my best to keep it from her. “But he did choose you as his heir, so let his actions speak louder than his words, okay? He wouldn’t have done that if he didn’t have faith in you.”

I suppress the impulse to bite my lip nervously and simply nod in acquiescence. Lily knows as well as I do that Grandpa only chose me as his successor because my brother, Archer, refused to bend to his will. If Archer hadn’t left home, refusing to set foot in the same house as our grandfather, I’d never have been given any responsibility at all.

Lily carefully looks over the black evening gown I’m wearing and double checks my makeup, ensuring it’s all perfect before nodding to herself in satisfaction. “This gala is going to cement your new position at your grandfather’s firm, and that’s all you need to focus on tonight. You’ll have so much fun networking, you won’t even realize Zane is there. You said there are usually hundreds of people at this event, right?”

I nod hesitantly, all the while hating that Zane makes me act so unlike myself. I’m no longer a timid little girl, yet that’s exactly who I become the moment he so much as crosses my mind.

“Then it won’t be hard to simply avoid Zane, *for now*. Personally, I think it’s best to face him head-on and set a new tone. He was your biggest rival when we were kids, but that’s nothing compared to the threat Windsor Hotels poses to Harrison Developments now. There’s no avoiding him entirely, and whether you like it or not, your companies will be competing constantly.”

“I know,” I murmur, sighing. “I can’t avoid him, but I’m just not sure I’m ready. Lil, this is the same guy that stole the first ‘F’ I got in algebra so he could frame it alongside his ‘A+’ before sending photos of it to the *entire* school. He teased me *every day* for *two years* when I had braces, and he’s taken every single opportunity to humiliate me and tear me down, ever since we were three years old. And now I’m supposed to be on good terms with him? I’m supposed to act cordial and thank him for inviting me, act like the way he bullied me for years didn’t leave scars?”

The pity in Lily’s eyes only makes me feel more pathetic, and I can’t help but look away. “Celeste,” Lily murmurs, her tone indulgent. “You, my

darling, are pure magic. The way everything you envision comes to life truly is magical, so do all of that visualization stuff that you love so much and envision the path that lies ahead of you — one without obstacles, one where you're the kind of woman Zane Windsor wouldn't dare mess with. Because that's who you are, you know? You *are* that woman, even if old insecurities are causing a momentary lapse in judgment. Aren't you the one that always tells me that I control my thoughts, and *they* don't control *me*? How about you take your own advice tonight?"

I blink at her, surprised to have my own mantra directed at me in that way. I can't even refute her words, and they make me snap out of my destructive thoughts. It's almost like a heavy veil is lifted, and my vision clears. It's strange how insecurity and dread truly seem to weigh me down.

"You're right," I whisper, my heart pounding wildly as my eyes fall closed. For years, I envisioned a world in which I finally made my grandfather proud, one where I was at the top of my industry and spearheaded the world's best hotel development projects. Why did I let that vision slip, even for a single moment?

"I'm always right," Lily says, chuckling. "When doubt sets in tonight, remember my words. You're pure magic, Celeste. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise — certainly not someone like Zane."

I grin back at her, my body relaxing as my confidence returns. I wish I could bring her with me tonight — I'd much rather go with her than with Grandpa. "Okay. I've got this," I tell her, my voice firm. "I'm just going to walk into that ballroom like I own it."

Lily's eyes twinkle with pride, and she gently strokes my hair. "That's my girl," she says. "Go and kill it out there. Charm them all, steal away all of Zane's market share. If anyone can do it, it's you."

I smile to myself as I look in the mirror, filled with renewed confidence. "I can do this," I murmur, more to myself than to Lily, but she nods nonetheless.

"You can — you *will*."

I take in my perfect makeup and my composed expression. I'm no longer the shy, introverted girl I used to be. The woman reflected back at me isn't the one that left five years ago, and Zane Windsor is about to discover that the hard way.

Chapter Two

ZANE

“I anticipate gathering at least a million in charity funds tonight. How are we doing so far, Valentina?” one of my brothers, Luca, asks his secretary.

She begins to run through calculations she’s done and I nod absentmindedly as I pop my favorite peppermint candy in my mouth, unable to focus on the conversation. So much goes into this annual charity gala, and normally, I enjoy seeing the results of all the effort my five siblings and I put in.

Not today, though.

“Zane?” Val says, her tone sharp. I turn to face her, guilt coursing through me when it becomes apparent she’s been trying to get my attention for a while now. She studies me for a moment, the edges of her red lips tugging up in amusement. “Why does your gaze keep darting toward the entrance? Who are you waiting for?”

I part my lips to deny her claim, only for the excuses to evaporate on my tongue. Val knows me too well — she’s quickly become as dear to me as my own sister is. There’s no way I could look her in the eye and lie to her. “I forgot to tell you,” I say instead. “But I’ll auction off a stay in the next hotel I acquire. I’ll let one person have the entire hotel to themselves for a full week, shortly before the grand opening, all expenses paid.”

She narrows her eyes slightly, as though she realizes my sudden donation is an attempt to throw her off my scent, but thankfully, she lets it

go. “Wonderful,” she says, grinning at me knowingly. “I’ll add it to our catalog. Do you have any specific dates in mind?”

“Yes, it’ll have to be—”

Fuck.

The breath rushes out of my lungs, leaving me lightheaded as I stare at the entrance, enchanted. Every thought fades away until there’s nothing left but her — my *Celestial*.

She’s back.

Finally.

I greedily drink her in, my gaze lingering on her beautiful amber eyes, those delicious pouty lips, and her long curly dark hair. How the fuck did she become even more beautiful in the few years she was away?

My eyes run down her body with a hint of impatience — it’s as though I can’t get enough of the sight of her, yet I’m not quite restrained enough to savor the experience. The way that long black dress clings to her body is positively sinful, and I instantly develop a love/hate relationship with the deep neckline that showcases her curves perfectly.

“*Celeste Harrison*,” Val says, her tone amused. I glance at her and force a blank expression on my face, but the look in her eyes tells me I’ve failed.

“Haven’t seen her in a while,” Luca adds, frowning. “She went to college in London, didn’t she? How long was she away? Three years?”

5 years, two months, and twelve days, actually. “Fuck if I know,” I mutter.

Luca chuckles when I run a hand through my hair, betraying my restlessness. “Right,” he says, grinning.

“What is she doing?” Val asks.

I follow her line of vision to find Celeste slyly checking the brand of our crystal glasses, and I bite back a smile. Her attempts to be inconspicuous only make her seem highly suspicious, and as expected, several of our security guards begin to move her way. Her grandfather, the CEO of Harrison Developments and one of our biggest competitors, doesn’t even notice — he’s turned away from her, too busy speaking to his acquaintances.

“For fuck’s sake,” I murmur, even as a hint of excitement runs down my spine. This is the perfect excuse to approach her without making Luca and Val even more suspicious. “It’s been three fucking minutes, and she’s

already causing trouble.” Val’s laughter trails behind me as I walk toward Celeste, my heart pounding wildly.

I nod at our guards, and they retreat. All the while, Celeste is blissfully unaware of their presence. How could she still be so oblivious to her surroundings?

“You know, if you wanted to snoop around, you could’ve just booked a suite here under the guise of not wanting to drink and drive tonight. Honestly, you could’ve simply said you didn’t feel like going home after the party when there are perfectly good rooms upstairs, and I’d have believed you — and because it’s you, I’d only have charged you triple for the convenience.”

Her relaxed demeanor disappears, making way for that cold resentment she reserves exclusively for me. “*Zane*,” she says, her voice dripping with disdain.

I smirk at her, and for a second, I wonder how she’d respond if she found out that the way she says my name instantly makes me hard. It has for years. Would her face flush in anger? Would her breathing quicken in that way it does right before she snaps at me?

“*Celeste*.”

She grits her teeth, and I try my hardest not to smile as I take her glass away and hand it to one of our servers. “I don’t trust you with this. You look like you were about to steal it.”

“*Steal it?*” she repeats, her anger mounting. It’s such a beautiful sight. “Do I look like some kind of petty thief to you?”

“No, Celeste,” I tell her, my heart racing. “You look fucking *brehtaking* tonight.”

Her eyes widen, and I realize I’ve caught her off guard. I’ve always loved the way her eyes darken when I infuriate her, but I think I might love this even more. The way her lips part, her disdain for me momentarily draining away... yeah, that’s fucking intoxicating.

“Very funny,” she says eventually, her guarded expression slipping back into place. For a moment, I’m certain I see a hint of disappointment in her eyes — almost like she’s let herself down by believing my words, however briefly.

I offer her my hand, and she stares at it in confusion. “What?” I ask, my tone provocative. “Did you forget how to dance? You were so good at it on prom night.”

“Of course I know how to dance,” she snaps, her cheeks reddening beautifully. “I just don’t want to dance with *you*.”

I smile at her, unable to help myself. Does the mention of prom fluster her? Does the memory of it make her heart race the way it does mine? “Oh really? I thought I saw Tommy heading your way, but I guess you don’t need my help,” I lie. Tommy, who’s had a crush on her all our lives, is not allowed anywhere near any of my hotels — but she doesn’t need to know that.

“*What?*” She hastily places her hand in mine as her gaze darts around us.

I nod solemnly as I pull her into a dance. “I’ll shield you, but you’ll owe me one.”

My arms wrap around her waist, and she slides her hands up my chest until she’s got them wrapped around the back of my neck. It’s surreal how perfectly she fits against me, and I can’t resist pulling her closer than necessary.

She raises a brow and looks up at me as I slowly guide her through our dance, my body rocking against hers with every move. It’s a soothing rhythm, yet it sets my soul on fire. I’ve got her so close, but it’s nowhere near close enough. The way she feels against me is intoxicating, and fuck, I need more of her.

“You really do look stunning tonight, Celeste,” I murmur, the words leaving my lips without conscious thought.

Her eyes widen, and then she huffs. “While most of the women in your life might appreciate your white lies and attempts to charm, I *don’t*. You forget that I’ve seen the endless parade of girlfriends you went through in high school. I know exactly what your idea of beauty is, and I’m well aware it isn’t me. Stop messing with me.”

I spread my palm across her lower back, and slowly slide the other up her spine until I’ve got it nestled in her long hair. “Girlfriends, hmm?” I repeat, a hint of anger manifesting in my voice. “And here I thought you knew me better than anyone else, Celeste. I’ve never called anyone mine.”

Her disarmed expression warms my heart, and I smirk when she stumbles a little, taking it as an opportunity to hold her closer. “You’re still as clumsy as you are beautiful,” I whisper.

She looks into my eyes, her lips parting a little when I tighten my grip on her hair, unable to suppress my need for her. I’m trapped in her gaze,

feeling more vulnerable than I ever have before. All our lives, I've hidden what I feel for her, but the years she was away from me tore down my defenses.

One of her hands slips down to my chest, and I glance at her yellow nails. "What is it called?" I ask without thinking, involuntarily revealing my obsession with her.

She blinks in confusion. "I'm sorry, I don't follow," she replies, sounding breathless.

I smile and ball my hand into a fist, gripping her hair harder. "The nail polish. What are you wearing tonight, Celeste?"

Pure disbelief flickers through her gorgeous eyes, and fuck if the way she looks at me doesn't make my cock twitch. "H-how do you know about that?"

I grin as I move my hand on her back just a touch lower before pulling her against me harder, making her feel exactly how she's affecting me. My lips brush against her ear as I lean in. "I've watched you for years, Celeste. How could I not know?"

Her gaze is heated when I straighten, her cheeks perfectly rosy. She's never looked more beautiful. "Tell me. What is your nail polish called?"

Celeste bites her lip for a moment, and then she smiles. "*I Just Can't Cope Acabana.*"

I burst out laughing, drawing curious glances from those around us, and she grins back at me. "You can't cope, huh? With what? Being back? Seeing me?"

"You're still as big-headed as ever," she says, but there's no malice in her words this time. "My world doesn't revolve around you, Zane."

"Is that why I caught you trying to steal one of my champagne glasses? Because you weren't at all interested in the way I run this hotel?"

She throws me a glare and pushes against my chest in warning. "I was *not* trying to steal *anything*!"

"I'll let it go if you admit one thing. Admit that you missed me."

Celeste rolls her eyes, and I gently begin to massage her scalp, needing to touch her as intimately as possible. "Unlike you, I don't make a habit of lying, and that's exactly what I'd be doing if I said that I missed you, Zane." She glares at me, and I smile back at her despite her scathing tone. I just love the way she's giving me her undivided attention. "Being away from

you was the highlight of my time in London. Not having to see your smug face brought me more joy than you'll ever know."

"That's unfortunate," I whisper, unable to tear my eyes off her. "Because I missed you, my beautiful Celestial. I missed that soft huff that escapes your lips when I annoy you, the way your eyes flash when I outdo you, the way you challenge me to do better."

"Is that what this is?" she asks, her voice faltering, her vulnerability shining through. "Is this another game we're playing, Zane? Another contest?"

The way she looks into my eyes without a hint of the timidity that always hid away her beautiful soul is a real fucking delight. "Perhaps so."

"You'll never win this one."

"You don't even know what game we're playing yet," I counter.

She shrugs and subtly rolls her hips, drawing a soft moan from my throat. "I have a pretty good idea, Zane. You won't get me into your bed — I'll never want you."

I smile, my heart pounding wildly. "That's not what you said when you came all over my fingers on prom night, my sweet goddess."

"That was a *mistake*," she snaps, taking a step away from me, her eyes flashing with shame and anger. "It's one I'll never repeat, Zane. Not even in my worst nightmares."

It hurts to know she regrets the one night that meant everything to me. Nonetheless, I smile, the way she expects of me. "I'll remember those words fondly the next time I'm pushing my cock deep into you, Celeste. When I've got you on the brink of an orgasm, my name on your lips, I'll make you eat those words before I make you beg for more. And you will. You'll *beg*, just like you did that night."

She glares at me, but that hatred I see in her eyes... it's laced with pure, unadulterated desire. She's right to say we're playing a game, the way we always have. What my beautiful Celestial hasn't quite figured out is that this time, I'm playing for keeps.

Chapter Three

CELESTE

“You’re late,” my grandfather says the moment I walk into my office, and I tense, surprised to find him leaning against my desk. His disapproving expression keeps me rooted in place for a few moments longer than it should have, and his mood sours further.

“It’s five to seven,” I tell him, double-checking my watch.

I regret the words the moment they leave my lips, but by then, it’s too late. Grandpa’s eyes harden, and he crosses his arms. “I expect better from my successor, Celeste. I’ve always been the first in the office, and you should be too.”

I take a deep breath and smile politely instead of saying what’s on my mind — that I *am* the first person in the office, other than him. “Noted,” I say, trying my hardest to add some cheer to my voice. “I’ll come in earlier tomorrow.”

Grandpa nods, seemingly placated, and gestures at my chair. I’m surprised he didn’t seat himself behind my desk when he found it empty. I’d probably have preferred that over having him tower over me like this. My grandfather has always been an intimidating man, but even so, nothing could have prepared me for his intensity at work.

“Tell me what you learned at the Windsor gala,” he asks as I sit down. “Was there anything notable about the hotel?”

Heat rushes to my face at the thought of Zane, and I clear my throat in an effort to clear my mind. “As expected, their latest hotel is pure luxury, down to every last detail. I analyzed everything I could get my hands on, and the results are... unsatisfactory. From what I can tell, a lot of their success comes down to synergy. Most of their locations are cherry-picked by Windsor Real Estate before they’re handed over to Windsor Hotels to develop, and all of their electronics, down to their elevators and automated curtains, are designed by Windsor Motors. Those are just the things they keep in-house. Their collaborations with other brands are unprecedented. Any brand that’s considered luxurious already has an exclusive partnership with the Windsors that they aren’t willing to compromise — right down to the hand cream brand they offer in their hotel bathrooms.”

Grandpa’s eyes flash with anger, and I sigh, bracing myself for yet another lecture. “You aren’t telling me anything I don’t already know, Celeste. I don’t need you to identify the problem — I need you to fix it. I could’ve told you all of this myself.” He straightens and shoots me a disappointed look. “I’m tired of coming second to the Windsors, and I’m done being humiliated by your inability to outperform that Windsor boy. Perhaps my hopes were too high, considering you couldn’t even beat his academic records in school.”

The bitterness in his voice hits me hard, and I can’t help but, feel utterly defeated. “I’ve only been working for you for a few weeks,” I tell him. “Give me a little bit of time, and I’ll come up with a plan. I have full faith that we’ll be able to increase our profits for the year by at least thirty percent. That kind of growth puts us on par with Windsor Hotels in three years. The Bellevue Inn could be a tremendous opportunity for us.”

I spent weeks analyzing our investment opportunities and ended up selecting a small Victorian inn that could be turned into a highly luxurious retreat — the Bellevue. My proposal for it is near-perfect, and if all goes well, Grandpa might actually start trusting me a bit more.

He huffs, his disbelief apparent. “I’ll believe it when I see it. For years, you’ve come second to Zane Windsor, and the gap between you two only increases with time, just like the gap between our companies. Zane started working years ago, while you were out gallivanting in London.” He looks away, agitated. “It’s bad enough that your father decided to forsake his upbringing to become a writer, of all things. If Archer hadn’t been equally stubborn, we’d at least be on the same level as them already.”

I subconsciously wrap my arms around myself, but it doesn't shield me from the pain Grandpa inflicts by reminding me I'm not his first or second choice. Part of me wants to tell him I'm trying my best, and that he should acknowledge that much at least. Years of being compared to my brother and Zane taught me better than that.

"Do better, Celeste. Considering how much time you spent on that little inn, you'd better finalize the acquisition without delay. It's an easy enough project, which is why you selected it, isn't it? There's nothing wrong with taking on some smaller projects every once in a while, so long as they're profitable. But we aren't a small firm. You need to think bigger if you ever want a chance at beating Windsor Hotels."

I nod demurely, and he takes a step toward my office door. "Grandpa!" I call, the tremor in my voice betraying my nerves.

Grandpa looks back over his shoulder. I hesitate, unsure how to voice my request. "About Lily's job application," I begin to say, and he clenches his jaw, annoyance flashing through his eyes.

"I made an exception for you because you're my granddaughter, Celeste. My company is not a playground. Your friend can apply the way everyone else does, and if she's good enough to work here, she'll be hired through the proper routes." He says it like he hasn't known Lily for years, like we haven't been best friends since we were twelve. "You need to learn to separate your private life and work — you're a *Harrison*. People will attempt to use you left and right if you let them. You're too weak. Work on that."

I nod as he walks out, biting the end of the fountain pen my brother bought me for my twenty-first birthday, wishing I'd done what he did, and walked away from Grandpa's offer to become his heir and inherit the company.

I didn't understand why Archer told me that working for Grandpa meant losing him, but I get it now. Grandpa has always been ruthless and demanding, but I hardly recognize him now. If Archer couldn't meet his expectations, what chance do I stand?

For as long as I can remember, I've been a disappointment to Grandpa, courtesy of Zane Windsor. I've always been unfortunate enough to be in the same classes as him, and no matter how hard I tried, my best was always the equivalent of his bare minimum. For as long as I can remember, he's

taken such great joy in besting me at everything, and now he'll get to experience that all over again, on a much larger scale this time.

I turn my desk chair and stare out the window, my thoughts drifting back to the gala. What is he playing at? It's obvious he's intent on messing with me the way he used to, but he's crazy if he thinks I'll take it the way I did in the past. I bite the pen harder as his words resound through my mind.

When I've got you on the brink of an orgasm, my name on your lips, I'll make you eat those words before I make you beg for more. And you will. You'll beg, just like you did that night.

I pull my pen away and grit my teeth in shame at the memory of prom night. For a few hours, I allowed myself to be as blinded as all the girls that have always surrounded him. The ones I always swore I'd never be like. It was a foolish decision that I live to regret.

I drop my head back against my chair and draw a shaky breath, tormented by my own mind. I should be focusing on the proposal I'm building, but instead, I'm thinking about the way he looked at me when I told him that night was a mistake.

He seemed hurt, even if it was only for a moment. That look he had on his face last weekend... was that how he looked at me when I told him to pretend it never happened? My memories are hazy, marred by my hatred. He's always done this to me — occupied all my thoughts, though usually for vastly different reasons.

I carefully place my pen back in its holder before reshuffling my papers. Perhaps this was his goal... distract me so much that I can't focus on the acquisition we're competing for.

I wouldn't put it past him.

Chapter Four

CELESTE

“I think I’m cursed,” I tell Lily the moment I step into her kitchen.

She looks up from her laptop and slips out of the bar stool by the counter to offer me a hug, not at all surprised that I let myself in uninvited. “Is that so?” she asks, clearly trying her hardest to suppress an amused smile.

I nod and take a bottle of her favorite rosé out of my bag. She raises her brow when I hand it to her, but instead of questioning me, she pours me an extra full glass — just the way I like it.

“Yep,” I continue. “I’m definitely cursed. How else would you explain the fact that Zane Windsor, billionaire heir to Windsor Hotels, set his sights on the small Victorian inn I spent *weeks* preparing a proposal for? I didn’t tell a *soul*. Not even my grandfather knew until yesterday. My luck can’t be this rotten — it’s a curse, I’m sure of it.”

Lily bursts out laughing, and I narrow my eyes at her as I pull myself up on her kitchen counter, my legs dangling off the edge. “I’m *serious*,” I snap. “I already thought it was ominous that the first work event I had to attend since coming back was the *Windsor* annual gala. And now this?”

“Celeste, you are *not* cursed. If anything, you’re one of the luckiest people I’ve ever met. If Zane is interested in that project, it’s probably because you managed to find a truly great investment opportunity, and he feels the same way. It’s kind of freaky how in-sync your minds always are

— if you two ever stopped fighting and actually worked together, I bet you could make some miracles happen. Solve world hunger, or something.”

Pure outrage rushes through my body at the mere thought of working with *Zane*, and it must show on my face, because Lily holds up her hands in surrender. “It was just a thought, a *terrible* thought that I’ll be discarding *immediately*.”

“You’d better. This project was meant to be a new start for me — a way to show Grandpa that he didn’t make the wrong choice when he hired me. It was supposed to be an easy win, and it turned into yet another way for Zane to humiliate me. There’s no way I can win this proposal if he’s even remotely interested in the inn.” I bury a hand in my hair and sigh, frustrated. “I knew working for Grandpa would be tough, but I underestimated just how hard it’d be to be pitted against Zane again. How am I supposed to beat Windsor Hotels? We might be second to them, but the gap between us feels insurmountable.”

Lily sighs and tops up my wine glass. “You don’t have to bridge that gap instantly, Celeste. Slow and steady wins the race, right? I know your stubbornness won’t let you admit it, but you choosing a project he’s also interested in means you have the same vision, and that’s all that’s really set Harrison Developments and Windsor Hotels apart.”

I begin to protest, but she shuts me up with one of her signature expressions — her brow raised and a chastising look in her eyes. “The other factors aren’t as big as you think they are. Their existing partnerships won’t last forever, and when those contracts expire, you can offer better deals. Sure, it’s hard to beat the Windsor name, but don’t underestimate just how prestigious of a brand your family has built. It might take some time, but there’s no reason why you can’t surpass Windsor Hotels. Not just anyone could do it, sure, but *you* can.”

She tucks one of my curls behind my ear and smiles. “This isn’t about grades, Celeste. When it comes to relationship management and networking, you’ve always outdone Zane. He banks on his family name and his deep pockets, but you never have. Use that to your advantage. You might hate the guy, but no one knows him as well as you do. No one but you could predict his moves, so use every terrible memory he created and turn them into your ammunition.”

I blink, my thoughts whirling. “This is why I need you,” I tell her, my voice soft. “With you by my side, I might actually be able to do this. We

could take on Windsor Hotels together, and Zane won't stand a chance."

She smiles, but it doesn't quite reach her eyes. "About that," she murmurs, her voice unsteady. "There's something I've been meaning to tell you."

My breath hitches as dread slowly takes root in the pit of my stomach. "What happened?" I ask, silently hoping that my suspicions are wrong.

"This morning, I received a rejection email from Harrison Developments."

My heart sinks, and disappointment washes over me. Did Grandpa have a hand in this? I mentioned her application to him just yesterday.

"It's okay," Lily says, forcing a smile. "I knew there was a chance this might happen, so I've been applying to other firms too. This is not the end of the world. I'll find something else. It'll be okay."

I grip the edge of her kitchen counter, my disappointment turning into anger. How could Grandpa do this? He knows she's my best friend, and for years, he's heard me talk about our plans to revolutionize the industry together.

"I'll talk to—"

"—No," Lily cuts me off. "Your relationship with your grandfather is rocky enough at the moment, and bringing this up will only make it worse. I know your parents spoke to him about it too, and it was all to no avail. It's okay, Celeste, truly. Just like you, I have a bachelor's and a master's from one of the best universities in the world. I'll find the right job eventually."

"How are you so okay with this?" I ask, my voice breaking. "We were supposed to rise to the top together — our plans have been set in stone since we were *kids*."

Lily grabs my hand and holds it between hers. "We will. We're only just at the start of our careers, babe. We'll work together eventually, I just know it. Besides, this way I won't have to doubt every promotion I get, or be ostracized by my peers who might fear upsetting the boss's best friend. I'll learn somewhere else, and I'll bring all of that knowledge back to Harrison Developments in a few years. It may not be the road we envisioned, but we'll get there eventually, alright?"

I grit my teeth and suppress my desire to argue with her, knowing it'll lead nowhere. It's clear she's made peace with the rejection, and there's no changing her mind when she's decided on something.

“Where have you applied? Have you gotten any offers yet?” I ask, trying my hardest not to sound upset.

Lily’s expression falls. “Pretty much most of the big firms. But no offers yet.”

I frown and stare her down. “You’re keeping something from me.”

She sighs, guilt flickering through her eyes. “Fine,” she says, losing her composure. “I’ve been rejected everywhere I’ve applied because they all want work experience for an entry-level role, which is just ridiculous. We didn’t do any internships while we were in London, and well... I guess we should have.”

Helplessness renders me speechless as realization sinks in. We’d both expected to work for Harrison Developments and didn’t think we needed internships, so we focused all our time on getting higher grades instead.

My mind begins to race as I think through Lily’s options. “Did you... did you apply to Windsor Hotels?”

The disgusted look she throws me answers my question before her words do. “I would *never* work there,” she snaps. “That bag of dicks bullied you for *years*. There’s no way I’ll become one of the worker bees that puts more money into his already stupidly deep pockets.”

I try my hardest to suppress my smile and fail, a peal of laughter escaping my lips. “Bag of dicks? I thought you just told me to use everything I know about Zane to my advantage, that our minds are so in-sync we’d solve world hunger if we ever worked together?”

She stares at me sheepishly and runs a hand through her long, blonde hair. “Yeah, well...whatever.”

I shake my head in amusement and force a serious expression. “I’m serious, Lil. I hate to admit it, but they’re the biggest and the best. Their training program is notoriously thorough, and they don’t require any prior work experience. Besides, we’ve always wondered what exactly it is that gives Windsor Hotels the edge that Harrison Developments seems to be missing — this way we can find out. Everything you learn, you’ll bring back with you when you join me in a couple of years.”

She doesn’t look convinced, but thankfully, she doesn’t look as disgusted as before. “Just apply,” I murmur. “It’s such a big company, you probably won’t even see him. Honestly, when else would we get an opportunity to learn about Windsor Hotels from the inside out?”

Lily narrows her eyes, but her smile is as wicked as mine. “Celeste Harrison, are you insinuating that you want me to become your little spy?”

I shrug. “I’m merely suggesting that we both take your advice. This is an unfortunate situation that we can turn into an opportunity.”

She sighs. “I’ve been rejected by eight different companies in the span of a few weeks. There’s no way Windsor Hotels would hire me, even if I did apply.”

“They will.” I may have to make a deal with the devil to ensure it, but one way or another, I’ll get her that job.

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Chapter Five

CELESTE

My body is taut with nerves as I walk into the acquisition meeting I've spent weeks preparing for, only to find Zane acting chummy with Jonathan Cavalier, the current owner of the inn we're both trying to acquire.

Both men look up when I enter, and the soft smile Zane throws my way only makes me feel more discouraged. I see it in their body language — I lost this deal before I even had a chance to pitch my proposal, simply because he's a Windsor.

Deep-rooted resentment unfurls in the pit of my stomach, despite my best attempts to contain it. Why is it this specific deal he's interested in? The Bellevue isn't big enough to be on his radar, and surely there are higher ROI projects available to him?

"Celeste," Zane says, rising to his feet. He walks around the conference table and pulls a chair out for me. I raise a brow, and his smile turns roguish, challenging. With his back turned to Jonathan, he's showing me his true colors. Zane's eyes slowly roam over my body, and I narrow mine, refusing to play this game. Instead, I force a fake polite smile for him before extending my hand toward Jonathan, whose attention is still entirely on Zane's back. How am I supposed to compete with the awe in the man's eyes?

"Ms. Harrison," he says, his tone friendly. "I've heard such great things about you from Mr. Windsor here. It looks like my hotel will be in good

hands regardless of who I choose today.”

“It absolutely will be,” I agree, my words ringing true. I might not like Zane, but he’s an excellent, yet fair, businessman. Unlike other big firms, he’s never acquired a hotel only to destroy its history and replace it with something modern. It’s why competing with him is even harder now than it ever was before — I might hate him as a person, but I respect him as a hotelier.

“Why don’t we start with Mr. Windsor,” Jonathan says as he retakes his seat, and I only just hide my surprise. He must have shot down everyone else’s pitch already, leaving only the two of us. Jonathan is a somewhat eccentric man, and he insisted on one collaborative meeting with his finalists instead of separate ones. It’s unconventional, but I understand why he prefers it this way. Sharing ideas in this manner will ultimately benefit his vision.

Zane moves to stand in front of the projector screen, his expression as serious as it always was right before we walked into any test at school. I never would’ve admitted it to myself back then, but whenever he looked like that, my heart would skip a beat. It still does. There’s something about watching the jokester melt away, leaving only the real him standing in front of me.

“This hotel’s rich history is its most valuable asset, and it’s one I would protect at all costs,” he says, and I lean in, curious to hear his plans. He displays his next slide — an image of the hotel as it could be, when fully restored to its former Victorian glory. It’s exactly how I envisioned it too, and my heart sinks. We have the same ideas, but he has a far higher budget to make it a reality.

Annoyance washes over me, and I clench my jaw as I sit back, watching him present a proposal I can’t compete with. Zane adjusts his tie in between slides, and my eyes roam down his body. The navy three-piece suit highlights his wide frame, and for one sinful moment, I’m reminded of the way he felt against me when we danced together.

My cheeks heat, and I tear my gaze away, memories of the two of us filling my mind. The way he kissed me when we were eighteen, my bottom lip between his teeth... the way he parted my legs and licked his lips, desperate for a taste. Somehow, I suspect that night would pale in comparison to being with him now. I hate the man, but he knows how to put that body of his to use.

Zane's eyes catch mine, and he holds me captive with his intensity. "I'd treat her with the love and honor she deserves," he concludes his presentation. "This must remain a boutique hotel, a place where love is celebrated and precious memories are made. The vision you've had for it is one I'd uphold."

Jonathan looks visibly emotional, and I can't blame him. Zane oozes sincerity and integrity — it's what he's known for. I'm the only one that's never been extended to, the only one who sees what's beneath that respectable exterior. My gaze drops to the nail polish I put on last night, a bright orange shade called *No Stopping Me Now*, and I take a deep breath, letting it fortify and encourage me as I rise to my feet.

I could argue that a hotel like the Bellevue would never truly be safe in the hands of a big corporation, but that simply isn't true when it comes to Zane Windsor, and in all fairness, we're not that much smaller than they are. I'm tempted, but I won't stoop to lies. If I win this proposal, I'll do it fair and square.

So instead of switching gears, I give the presentation I prepared. The one that's filled with all the details I know he was hoping to see in Zane's proposal — the specific restorations I have in mind, the marketing plan, the essential renovations. I see it in his eyes — if Zane hadn't been here, I'd have won him over.

If only I could compete with a Windsor budget. He'll make an offer so high that Jonathan won't be able to say no, especially after seeing that he has no plans to destroy his life's work. Zane can get away with only making a small amount of profit, but I can't. I won't be able to offer what he can.

My stomach tightens as I wrap up my presentation, and Jonathan thanks both of us. I can already hear my grandfather's scathing words. I knew competing with Zane would be hard, but I underestimated how much it would hurt, how helpless I'd feel.

"I'll be in touch on Monday," Jonathan promises us, but his eyes are glued to Zane.

I'm on autopilot as I shake Jonathan's hand and thank him for his time, my heart heavy. *Weeks.* I spent weeks on this proposal, refusing to give up when Grandpa told me there was no point even making an offer if Zane had his sights on this hotel. I should've known better. I've grown so much in the years I was away, but right here, right now, I feel like the same teenager that grew up in Zane's shadow.

My smile slips the moment the meeting room door falls closed behind me, and I draw a shaky breath. Perhaps this is the reminder I needed. We aren't at school anymore, where the playing field was a bit more even. Attempting to acquire projects Zane is interested in means setting myself up for failure. I should've switched gears the second I learned he wanted to make an offer, instead of wasting so much precious time.

The door opens behind me, and I glance over my shoulder to see Zane follow me out, his gaze surprisingly concerned.

"Celeste."

His tone makes something dark and needy ricochet over me, and I increase my pace as I rush toward the elevator, hoping to escape him and knowing I'll fail.

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Chapter Six

ZANE

I rush after Celeste when she leaves the conference room, a hint of worry tugging at me. She seemed discouraged, and the way she looked at me reminded me of all the times I inadvertently hurt her in my quest to gain her attention in high school.

I can pretty much guess what she's thinking — that I'm targeting her all over again by choosing to acquire this specific project. If I told her I was just as surprised to learn of her involvement, would she believe me? I'm not sure, but I'll be damned if I let this drive a wedge between us.

"Celeste!" I call, but she doesn't stop walking, doesn't even look back. If anything, she just increases her pace and slips between the closing elevator doors before I can stop her. *Damn it.*

I glance at the door that leads to the stairs. My decision is made in a split second, and before I'm even consciously thinking about what I'm doing, I'm already halfway down the stairs. I've waited years for a shot with her — I won't wait another second, won't let my own dumb behavior come between us the way it used to.

I reach the ground floor moments before the elevator does, my breathing ragged. The doors open, and Celeste freezes mid-step, her eyes wide with shock. She's so fucking pretty in that black dress, her wild hair framing her face, tempting me to reach for it, grab hold and never let go.

Her expression shutters closed, and she ignores me as she turns to walk out of the building. I grin and fall into step with her. “What do you think you’re doing?” she asks, her tone annoyed.

“Walking to my car,” I answer cheerily. “I’m parked right next to you.”

She glances up at me, pure exasperation in her gaze, and I chuckle, my heart warming. I prefer this over the listlessness she portrayed when she left the meeting room.

“I loved your presentation,” I tell her, my words genuine. “Your attention to detail is unparalleled.”

Something shifts in her expression, and seeing that defeat written all over her pretty face just tears me apart. She looks away and increases her pace, clearly eager to get away from me.

“Hey,” I murmur, my hand wrapping around her wrist as I pull her to a stop a few steps from her car. “What’s wrong?”

She lifts her face, but she doesn’t look me in the eye. Instead, she looks over my shoulder, a soft sigh on her lips. “Nothing is wrong,” she denies, like I wouldn’t notice the way she holds her shoulders, the way she seemed to lose faith in her own proposal halfway through, her normally fiery eyes turning blank.

I pull her closer and bring her wrist to my chest. “Is this about the acquisition? This hotel will be yours, Celeste. Your vision for it is close to mine, but your marketing plan was stronger.”

She narrows her eyes and pulls her arm away. “We’ll find out on Monday,” she says, sounding far more discouraged than I’d like her to. I watch as she tries to paste on a polite smile, and all it does is make me feel unsettled.

I should be happy that she’s making an effort to act professional around me, but it just makes me feel like the distance between us is greater than it’s ever been before. I want the girl I had in my arms on prom night, the one she showed me a glimpse of at the gala last month.

“It’s not just the proposal, is it?” I ask, my voice soft. I step toward her, but she takes a step back, surprise crossing her face. “Something else is bothering you. I can tell by the way you raise your left brow, and the way your pupils dilate just a little. It somehow turns your beautiful eyes a shade darker. You only ever look like this when you’re deeply upset, and something as simple as this proposal couldn’t have been the reason. What happened?”

She stares at me wide-eyed, caught off guard. “I don’t understand,” she says, her voice faltering. “Why do you care?”

I sigh and run a hand through my hair to keep from touching her. “I’ve always cared.”

“You’ve always had a funny way of showing it,” she retorts, pain bleeding into her voice.

I can’t help but recoil, a hint of shame washing over me. “I’m sorry, Celeste. Truly. Being young is no excuse — I often took our rivalry too far, but that doesn’t mean I never appreciated your intellect. No one has ever been able to challenge me the way you do, and being able to compete with you again is something I’ve been looking forward to since you left. I just thought you’d feel the same way. After that night, I thought...”

Her lips part, and her face flushes beautifully. She’s so fucking stunning, it’s insane. “I thought we agreed we’d forget it happened,” she murmurs, her gaze darting around us like she’s scared to be seen with me.

“I don’t recall agreeing to that particular demand of yours, my sweet Celestial. How could I possibly forget my first time—”

I cup the back of my neck and look away as heat rushes to my face. I hadn’t meant to let that slip, but as always, she makes me feel fucking unhinged, out of control.

“You... you were a virgin too?” she whispers, pure shock transforming her face.

“Wasn’t that obvious? You were my first, and you ruined me for everyone else.”

She sucks in a breath, her expression disarmed. “But all the rumors in school... and I saw you.”

“Yeah? What did you see, Celeste? You saw some girls trying to get my attention, but did you ever see me hold someone’s hand? Have you ever seen me kiss someone that wasn’t you?”

She stares at me, and I can’t help but smile. I reach for her, and this time, she lets me. I wrap one of her curls around my index finger and cup her face with my other hand, my touch reverent. “I truly am sorry, Celeste. I was a shitty little kid, and at the time, I didn’t realize how hurtful some of my actions were. If I asked for a ceasefire, would you grant me one? I won’t ask for your forgiveness, Celestial. I’m only asking for one single chance to earn it.”

She raises a brow, her chest rising and falling faster than before. Does she feel this thing between us too? “A chance?” she repeats, seemingly unconvinced.

I nod, my expression solemn. “A chance to be friends, to leave the past behind us. I won’t lie to you and say I won’t enjoy competing with you at work, but it won’t be the way it used to be. We’ve both grown up in the last couple of years. Won’t you give me a chance to show you who I’ve become? Who knows... you might just like what you find.”

“I... I don’t know what to say. It’s true we’ve both grown up since high school, but that doesn’t mean all my wounds healed. Some of the things you did and said when we were kids really hurt me.”

“Say yes,” I whisper. “Please.”

She studies my face, as though she doubts my sincerity. I can’t even fault her for the suspicion she treats me with — I earned that behavior all by myself. “One chance,” she murmurs, inclining her head ever so slightly, barely a nod.

“Thank you.” I brush the back of my fingers over her cheek, my heart hammering in my chest. “Then... will you tell me what’s bothering you so? Is it something I did? Don’t tell me it’s the proposal. I’ve known you since we were *three*. I know it isn’t that.”

She parts her lips like she wants to deny my claim, but then she seems to think better of it. “You won’t make fun of me?” Her voice trembles, and it hurts to know that I’ve mistreated her so often that she genuinely believes I would.

I take a step closer and cup her face with both hands, my eyes on hers. “Never again, Celestial.”

Her gaze heats, and I just know she’s reminded of the first time I called her that. My goddess, my *Celestial*. She claims she wants to forget it ever happened, but the way she’s looking at me makes me think she’s lying to herself as much as she’s lying to me.

“I’ve... I’ve been meaning to ask you for a favor. I know it’ll cost me, and that’s okay — you’ll probably want a favor in return, if you hear me out at all...”

“Yes,” I say, interrupting her rambling.

She raises her brows, the edges of her lips turning into a tiny smile. “You have no idea what I’m trying to say.”

I shrug. “You’d never ask me for something unreasonable, so whatever it is you want, consider it done.”

She looks down and grabs the lapel of my suit, gripping it tightly. Does she realize how intimately we’re touching each other? The way I’m holding her face, and the way her fingers are wrapped around the fabric of my suit... I can’t be the only one who feels this, can I? She claims to hate me, but she fails to realize that in doing so, her attention has always been on me as much as mine has been on her.

Celeste takes a deep breath, almost like she’s trying to steel herself, and I stare at her, eager to find out what makes her set aside her pride to ask me for a favor.

“Do you... do you remember Lily?”

I stare at her blankly, the name sounding somewhat familiar.

She sighs and releases my suit to wrap her fingers around my wrists, almost as though she intended to pull my hands away, but instead she just holds on to me. “She’s my best friend. Lily went to high school with us, but she wasn’t in many of our classes.”

I frown as I try to think back. I’ve always had tunnel vision when it comes to Celeste — when she’s in the room, I can’t see anyone else. That’s been the case since we were ten. It just took me six years to understand why.

“Right. She’s about your height, with brown hair, right?”

She stares at me in disbelief. “Um... no. She’s blonde, and she’s much taller than me.” There’s something in her eyes that makes me unable to focus on her words, because all I want to do is find out what suddenly made her look at me that way — like she’s pleased with me, like she’s letting me in.

“I’m sorry. I’ve only ever had eyes for you. I do remember a girl always hanging around you at lunch though. Is that the girl you’re referring to?”

Her eyes widen a fraction, and her gaze drops to my lips. Fuck. Does she have any idea what she does to me? If she takes one step closer, I won’t be able to hide it.

“You can’t mean that,” she says, her voice faltering. “What game are you playing, Zane? If you hurt me the way you used to in high school, I’ll never forgive you.”

I draw a shaky breath and look into her beautiful eyes. “I’d never forgive *myself* if I hurt you again, Celeste. You promised me one chance

just moments ago, didn't you? So give me one chance to prove to you I've changed. Ask for your favor, and whatever it is, I'll grant it."

She hesitates, as though she isn't sure she can put her faith in me. Whatever she wants is clearly important to her.

"My grandfather rejected Lily's job application because he thinks I'm too soft and won't be able to keep my work and private life separate enough." She looks at me pleadingly, and all it does is make my heart race faster. "Lily applied for a job at Windsor Hotels, and, well... I just wanted to ask if you'd consider hiring her."

"That's it?" I ask, surprised.

"I know it's a lot to ask for, but I'd be grateful if you'd consider it. And yes, it did cross my mind, and Lily and I did joke about it, but this isn't a ploy to gain inside knowledge about Windsor Hotels."

I chuckle and gently brush her hair out of her face. "If you want inside knowledge, just ask me directly. Odds are I'll tell you."

Celeste stares at me like she can't quite figure me out, and I can hardly blame her. All I've ever shown her is the shitty teenager I used to be — she isn't used to the man I've become. Not yet.

"I'll grant you a favor in return," she tells me, her words escaping her lips in a rush. It's clear that in the brief few seconds it took me to agree to her request, she's somehow convinced herself that I'll say no.

"I'll hire your friend, Celeste. I'm not normally involved with the hiring process, but I'll see that she's hired. Email me her CV later today, and I'll forward it to HR."

I step back reluctantly to reach for one of my business cards, and she stares at it for a moment before looking back up at me. "I was prepared to keep hating you," she whispers. "But you're making it so hard."

"Good," I tell her. "Because hatred is the last thing I want you to feel when you think of me."

She parts her lips to say something, only to change her mind and shake her head slightly. "If you do hire her, you won't treat her unfairly, right? If even a small part of you does still resent me, may I please ask you not to take it out on Lily?"

It's tough to see that distrust in her eyes when I know I'm the one who put it there. "I promise, Celeste. Not only will I hire her, I'll ensure she's treated fairly."

“I need more than just a promise,” she says, her tone sharp, as though she isn’t willing to take any risks with her friend’s fate. It’s odd how jealous I am of this girl I can’t even remember. What does it take to inspire such loyalty in Celeste?

I grab her hand and lift it slowly, my eyes never leaving hers as I turn her palm toward me and gently kiss the inside of her wrist, my eyes falling closed for a moment. “A vow, then,” I whisper. “I vow to you that I’ll take good care of your friend. How about that?”

Her face flushes beautifully, and she snatches her arm back, flustered. Fucking gorgeous. “Th-thank you, Zane.”

“Anything for you,” I tell her, wearing my heart on my sleeve. She thinks I’m messing with her, that I’m merely being flirtatious as part of our new game. What would she say if she found out she’s the only one I’ve ever treated this way?

Chapter Seven

CELESTE

My mood is somber as I trudge through the woods that divide Lily's father's property and ours, until I reach the small cabin that sits right at the border. I'm not at all surprised to find the light on inside. I knew I'd find her here today, on the anniversary of her mother's death.

"Lily?"

She looks up from the small table in the corner and closes her diary when I walk in, her eyes filled with tears. She swipes at them, but the redness in her eyes would've given her away regardless. "Celeste," she cries.

I hold my arms open for her, and she walks into them, fresh sobs racking her body. I hold her tightly as I lead her to our little sofa, unsure what to do or say. Her father built this cabin for her years ago, and ever since, it's been our secret base. It's where we go when we need a break from the world, and it's where I've found her on this day every single year. She never asks me for the support she needs — always choosing to suffer in silence instead, and I wish she wouldn't. Despite our longstanding friendship, she's always convinced she's a burden to me, and today, more so than any other day, I wish she'd rely on me the way I rely on her.

"I d-didn't tell you this," she stammers. "But he died in prison. John."

My grip on her tightens as I process the news, a deep sense of injustice lodging in my throat, my own grief rapidly bringing tears to my eyes.

“He d-didn’t even serve his f-full sentence. He didn’t deserve to die so soon. N-not yet. I just... I... I never should have told him. I saw him in my dreams last night, remembered how he’d thanked me when I told him our new address.”

I bite my lip as I think back to the first time she told me about her mother, and how she was brutally murdered by her boyfriend because she’d tried to leave him to give her marriage another chance.

I still remember Lily’s torment when she told me she was the one who found her mom. She was only eleven and had just come home from school, annoyed her mother hadn’t met her at the bus stop, like she usually would.

“You didn’t know,” I remind her. “You didn’t know they’d broken up, and your mom never told you to keep it a secret from him. Even if she did, it still wouldn’t be your fault, Lily. You were just a child, and he was someone you knew and trusted.”

She buries her face in my neck, her grip tight, like she’s scared she’ll fall apart if she doesn’t hold on to me. I hug her as hard as I can, praying my words are getting through to her.

When she first moved here shortly after losing her mom, she had terrible nightmares and struggled to make friends. If we didn’t live right next to each other, she might never have warmed to me either. Lily still keeps to herself most of the time, and I wonder if it’s because she’s scared to be betrayed by someone so close to her, like her mother was. Or perhaps she’s scared to lose another person she loves. It didn’t help that her father ended up remarrying. It just made her feel more alone, and this cabin ended up becoming the place where she kept her mother’s memories.

She’s doing much better now, but around the time of her mother’s death anniversary, her nightmares return, and guilt threatens to consume her. I don’t know how to take away her pain, but I’d do anything to lessen its hold on her. She’s so often been there for me, and I can’t help but feel like I’m failing her in return.

“I just wish she was still here,” she tells me, and my heart shatters.

“Me too,” I whisper. “She’d be so proud of you, Lily. You’re the smartest and kindest person I know, and you inherited her beauty, you know? I have no doubt that you’re everything she’d hoped you’d be, and more.”

Lily tries to draw a shaky breath, only to choke on her sobs. “I c-can’t even f-find a job, Celeste. She’d be s-so embarrassed of me. I just feel so

lost, and I hate feeling this way.”

I pull away to look at her and shake my head. “You’ll find something, Lil,” I tell her, my mind drifting to Zane. He’s hurt me and let me down so many times throughout the years, but if he grants me this one favor, I’ll forgive him for all of it.

My stomach turns as I silently plead with him, with the universe. I just want Lily to be granted the reprieve she deserves, and it kills me that I can’t be the one to offer it. “Give it a bit more time, and the right role will be yours, I’m sure of it. You’re brilliant, and you’re the hardest worker I know. Any company would be lucky to have you.”

It’s been two weeks since I asked Zane to hire her, and with each day that passes, I’m more convinced that I should beg him the way he probably wants me to. Would it make a difference? I can no longer read him the way I used to, but when I stood in front of my car with him, I’d been convinced that he wasn’t the same boy I grew up with. I can only hope I was right.

Lily looks into my eyes as though she’s searching for a spark of hope. “I don’t know what I’d do without you,” she whispers. “You have no idea how grateful I am to have you in my life, Celeste. You saved me, and you don’t even know it.”

I smile at her, glad to see her grief lifted a little. “You saved me too, Lily. That’s what we do for each other, isn’t it? We’re each other’s lifeline.”

I can’t count the number of times she consoled me because something Zane did had wounded me deeply. She was there when my brother left home, when our house turned into a battlefield because of my grandfather’s decision to disown him. Nothing I’ve experienced could compare to what she’s been through, yet she never once made me feel like my pain wasn’t real, wasn’t worth worrying about.

Lily nods and sniffs, her breathing steady. “My mom would’ve loved you. Probably just as much as your mom loves me.”

Normally I’d argue with her about who my mom loves more — often, it seems like it’s Lily, but tonight, I let her win this one. “I think I’d have loved her, too. I’ve loved every story I’ve heard about her.”

She pulls away and walks back to the table to grab the photo of her mother that she keeps in her diary. “I’m trying so hard to focus on the good memories, but when I close my eyes at night, I can see her on that bed, the way I found her. God, Celeste. Do you think she blames me?”

“No. She loved you more than anything, and if he hadn’t found her then, he’d have found her another way. You were only eleven, Lily. You were just a *child*.”

She looks at me like she wants to believe my words but can’t. I take her hand. “Tell me that story about her trying to make homemade ice cream and it ending in firemen rushing into your house.” It’s a story she told me once when we were thirteen, and it’s one of the few times she laughed while mentioning her mother.

Her expression lightens. “I’d nearly forgotten about that. Mom really couldn’t cook, it was crazy. She had a heart of gold and the very best intentions, but somehow, everything she touched instantly became completely inedible. She couldn’t even make toast, you know? Did I tell you about the time she wanted to make me bear-shaped waffles, and it turned into something out of my worst nightmares? It was truly horrifying, but she was so proud of her creation that I just tried my best to swallow whatever concoction she’d created.”

I smirk and lean back as she tells me the very best stories of her childhood, the good drowning out the bad. She always does this for me — gently leads me back in the right direction when my thoughts go awry. I’m glad I’m able to do the same for her for once.

Chapter Eight

CELESTE

I'm anxious as I park in front of the large development my grandfather asked me to acquire. Grandpa didn't even want me to focus on The Bellevue, but he was furious when I lost to Zane. All of a sudden, it was something that should've been ours, and ever since, he's been berating me for it. Every chance he's got, he reminds me that I spent so much time on it and don't have anything to show for it, that I can't compete with Zane despite my superior education, and that he doesn't have any faith in me.

I'm scared to let him down again, unsure I'll be able to take more of his disparaging comments. When I learned Zane was interested in Chateau Chiara, I nearly walked away, unwilling to put myself through more torment. If only Grandpa hadn't found out that Zane wanted this chateau too.

The second he heard about it, he made it his mission to make this development ours, convinced it must be a sound investment if Zane wants it. It hurts how much more he values Zane's investment decisions over mine. When I first found this project, he nearly dismissed it, convinced it'd be a money pit.

My phone rings over speakerphone, and I blink dazedly at Lily's name on my screen before swiping to accept the call.

"Celeste!" she shouts excitedly. "I got the job!" I gasp, and she bursts out laughing. "Yes! Can you believe it? I had to sit through six rounds of

interviews, but I made it.”

My mood lifts instantly, my heart filling with gratitude and happiness. “I told you!” I say. “I knew you’d get it. You’re brilliant, Lil. Of course you were going to get the job.”

“And you were right. I didn’t even see Zane once. I wasn’t sure about working at Windsor Hotels, but this might just turn out fine.”

“*It will.* You’re going to do great,” I reassure her, even as a hint of disappointment washes over me. I know it isn’t really like that, but it feels like I’m losing to Zane all over again. Lily should’ve been working with *me*, and I hate that she’s going to Windsor Hotels of all places.

“I won’t hold you up,” she says. “You’re about to walk into an acquisition meeting, right? You’ll kill it, Celeste. I just know it.”

“I hope so. I’ll call you afterward. I have a good feeling about this one.”

She hums and wishes me luck, her excitement rubbing off on me just a little. It’s ridiculous, and I know it, but I can’t help but feel like it’s unfair that Zane now has one of the best interior designers I know at his disposal, all because my grandfather was stupid enough to reject Lily’s application. He expects me to compete with Zane, but simultaneously, he’s the reason we just lost what would’ve been our best hire.

I sigh as I step out of the car, only to freeze when I find Zane leaning against his car, parked right across from me. He smiles, and my heart skips a beat when I notice the way he draped his suit jacket over his arm, the sleeves of his shirt rolled up to just below his elbows, revealing his forearms. I bite down on my lip as my eyes travel back to his face, my heart beating a little faster than it did before. Everything about this man annoys me, but his most irredeemable quality is how unfairly handsome he is, despite his rotten personality.

He pushes out of his car and walks over to me, his steps confident and his eyes never leaving mine. There’s something so unnerving about being the center of Zane Windsor’s attention. For years, it was the worst thing that could’ve happened to me, but now... now I’m not so sure.

“Celeste,” he drawls, his gaze twinkling with something that just transfixes me. “You aren’t spitting fire at the mere sight of me today, so I take it you got the good news?”

I raise a brow and nod. “I didn’t think you’d keep your word.”

He reaches for me, and my entire body tenses when his hand wraps around my wrist. He smirks as he raises it between us, his thumb caressing

my pulse point. “I made a vow, didn’t I? I’m many things, Celeste, but I’m not a liar.”

I look into his eyes, heat rushing to my face when he pulls our joined hands to his chest. I can feel his body heat through the thin fabric of his shirt, and something hot and needy rushes through me, making me want to step closer to him. The way he looks at me... it’s how he looked at me that night amongst the roses, when he laid me down and told me I was his goddess.

I turn my wrist and spread my fingers across his chest without thinking. His gaze drops to my hand, his heart thudding loudly against my palm, in sync with mine. “What’s this one?” he asks, tightening his grip on my wrist. I glance at my light purple nail polish, and bite back a smile as I try to pull my hand away, but he won’t let me. “Oh, this’ll be a good one, judging by the look in your eyes. Tell me.”

I part my lips, only to snap them shut, amusement bubbling just below the surface as I grip the fabric of his shirt. The way he’s holding my wrist in place makes my nails dig into his chest, reminiscent of how I touched him that night, five years ago. Zane’s gaze darkens, and his eyes drop to my lips for a moment.

“*You’re Such a Budapest*,” I whisper, trying my hardest to suppress a smile. Zane chuckles, and the sound rushes through me, dragging pure unbidden delight after it.

“Yeah?” he murmurs, stepping closer to me. I refuse to budge, and his body brushes against mine, his face tipped down while mine is raised to meet his. “This one is all for me, isn’t it? Did you buy that while thinking of me, Celestial? Are you wearing it for me?”

I part my lips to deny it, but we both know I’d be lying if I did. Zane’s gaze travels to my mouth, and he inhales shakily. “I’m still on your mind, huh? I was worried you’d forgotten all about me in the time you were gone, that perhaps I was just someone you left in the past.”

The vulnerability in his expression disarms me, and I suck in a breath, unable to look away. I should step back, shouldn’t play these games with him, but I can’t help myself. “I wish,” I whisper truthfully.

Something flashes in his eyes, and his expression softens. “Would you believe me if I tell you I don’t want to be a pest anymore?”

“Then tell me, Zane,” I mutter, my voice faltering. “Why are you here? This is the second time I identified a brilliant investment opportunity, only

to find out that you're one of the bidders too. This can't be a coincidence. Are you spying on me, trying to thwart Harrison Developments' growth?"

He lets go of my wrist, a hint of frustration crossing his face. "You'll always think the worst of me, won't you?"

He steps back, and I wrap my arms around myself, unable to refute his words. I've never seen Zane look at me with such regret in his eyes, and as I stare back at him, I find myself wondering about the man he's become. So often I've had to remind myself that I'm no longer the girl I was before I left, yet I struggle to believe that I'm not the only one who changed.

Zane sighs and retrieves his phone from his pocket. "Look," he says, his voice soft. I take a step toward him, my eyes widening when I recognize his parents in the photo he's showing me, the hotel behind us identical to the one in the photo's background. "My mother loved this place so much that we stayed here often, even though it wasn't one of our properties. My grandmother tried to acquire it for her, but they weren't willing to sell then. Maybe it's silly, but when I heard it was finally on the market, I just... I wanted to have it. I just wanted to make my mother's wish come true, even though she isn't around to see it. This place holds a lot of memories, and the thought of it falling into ruins just... I couldn't take it."

"I'm sorry. I didn't... I didn't know."

"There's a lot you don't know about me, Celeste, and therein lies the problem, doesn't it? You only know the worst parts of me, because that's all I've ever shown you." He tears his gaze away and shakes his head, helplessness marring his handsome face. "I'll walk away from this acquisition if it'll make you give me a chance."

I stare at him, unable to figure him out. The man in front of me is so different from the one in my memories, and I can't tell which is real. He can't have changed this much, can he? The sincerity in his eyes... could it be real?

"There's enough space in this industry for us both," I tell him, meaning every word. "You can have this one, Zane." I look away, heat rushing to my cheeks. "Not that I could compete with you if you really wanted to acquire this."

His shaky laugh draws my eyes back to his, and the disbelief in them renders me speechless for a moment. "You could," he says. "You're probably the only one in this world that can genuinely compete with me and walk away victorious."

I grin up at him, oddly pleased with his words. “Then count yourself lucky I won’t. Not this time.”

I step back, my stomach twisting as I try to think of a way to explain this to my grandfather. I’ll have to tell him a partial truth and say that the Windsors vastly overvalued the hotel, and that outbidding them would result in ridiculous losses.

I hesitate, my heart sinking as I think back to the last few weeks, and all of Grandpa’s comments. Last time, his ire felt unwarranted and unfair, but this time? This time I’m walking away from an investment knowing what the consequences will be, and I can’t find it in me to care, not when Zane looks at me like I truly am the goddess he proclaims me to be.

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Chapter Nine

ZANE

My gaze lingers on the restoration plans for the Bellevue acquisition, and for the first time since I took over this company from my grandmother, I don't feel the thrill of the win.

I sigh as I read over the budget allocation, my mind continuously drifting back to Celeste. I thought the years she was gone would've doused the torch I held for her throughout my teens. Hell, I low-key prayed I wouldn't feel a thing when I saw her again, that what I felt for her was nothing more than a schoolboy crush. I couldn't have been more wrong. Having her back in my life made every repressed feeling surge to the surface, making me even more greedy than I was when we were younger.

For years, the competition between us was borderline toxic, my behavior increasingly problematic as we both refused to give in, intent on besting the other. At what point did the way her eyes flash when she outdoes me begin to make my heart skip a beat? When did I begin to notice her the second she enters a room, and when was the first time all of my thoughts were sent into disarray simply because I'd heard her laugh? My feelings for her evolved slowly, growing right along with us. It took me years to realize my fixation on her wasn't mere rivalry — it crossed the line long before I laid her down in my mother's observatory.

How do I earn a chance with her after everything I've put her through? Do I even deserve one? A woman like her is far too good for the likes of

me, but fuck, the idea of her with anyone else fucking kills me. The way she looked at me when I ran into her at Chalet Chiara told me that nothing I could do would erase the impression I've made throughout the years, but then again... she did walk away from that acquisition, and she did that for *me*. In the past, she never would've considered doing me a favor, no matter my pleas or rationale. That's gotta count for something, right?

"Mr. Windsor?" my secretary calls.

I look up to find him smiling at me sheepishly, like he's been trying to catch my attention for a while now. "Apologies, Mike," I murmur, trying not to cringe at the purple suit he's wearing today. I'm not sure if he's doing it on purpose, but sometime last year, he decided to revamp his wardrobe and replaced all of his perfectly good suits with hideous pieces that I'm certain aim to offend. I suspect he finds pleasure in watching me bite my tongue.

Mike shakes his head as he walks in, a set of documents in his hands. "It's odd," he remarks, "how often you're lost in thought these days, when I've never seen you like that even once in the four years we've worked together. It's equally odd that it coincided with the appointment of Celeste Harrison as her grandfather's successor. Worried about our biggest competition getting ahead of us now that such a brilliant mind joined them?"

I narrow my eyes at him in warning, but he merely chuckles. Mike is probably the only person in all of Windsor Hotels that doesn't remotely fear me. He was appointed by my grandmother, but I've come to consider him a friend, and a valuable addition to my team. "I'm not concerned in the slightest. With her at the helm, they *will* surpass us. It's only a matter of time."

For the first time since I met him, Mike loses his composure, and I bite back a smile as his eyes grow round and his lips part in outrage. Four seconds, that's how long it takes him to pull on his ugly pink polka dot tie and rein in his shock. He clears his throat, pasting on an eerily calm expression as he hands me the files he brought in. "Well, I certainly hope that won't come to pass," he tells me, sounding miffed, like I personally slighted him. "This is the team I selected for the Bellevue project."

I glance over the names and pause. "There's a girl called Lily amongst our new hires. Add her to the team."

“Lily?” Mike repeats, his brows raised. “Ah, Liliana? The new interior designer? She’s quite brilliant, and I did consider her for the team, but I was worried you wouldn’t allow it since she has no prior work experience. I’m surprised you even know her name.”

“There’s only one way to gain experience,” I shrug. “And this project isn’t so large that it’ll be overwhelming for a newbie.” Lily has actually been a great employee so far, and she’s funny too. Each time I speak to her, she reminds me a little of Celeste. It’s unfortunate to think we all could’ve been friends had I not let the rivalry between the Harrisons and the Windsors get in the way. “The rest is approved,” I say once I finish going over the papers.

Mike nods and straightens the documents on my desk, throwing me a curious look before walking out. The door falls closed behind him, and I hesitate for a moment before grabbing my phone.

ZANE

Just out of curiosity, would you say that good behavior deserves to be rewarded?

I stare at my phone, my heart pounding as I wait for her to reply. “This is ridiculous,” I mutter to myself, but that doesn’t stop me from straightening in my seat when my phone finally buzzes seven minutes later. I don’t think I looked away from the screen even once while I waited.

CELESTIAL

Who is this?

My heart sinks. I’ve had the same number since we were kids, and she’s one of only a handful of people outside of my family who have it. Or, so I thought.

Did she delete my number, or did she simply lose it as she switched phones? I know for a fact she had it, because I used to text her in class just so I could watch her snicker to herself when my name popped up on her screen, thinking herself so clever for saving me in her contacts as *In-Zane*.

ZANE

Since you don’t know who I am, that begs the reverse of the question too... should bad behavior be punished?

I can only hope you believe it should be, since I suspect I’d greatly enjoy punishing you.

I watch as the text bubbles appear and disappear, a slow smirk tugging at the edges of my lips. God, I still love making her flustered. I wish I could see her right now, watching that curiosity flicker in her eyes.

CELESTIAL

It really is a matter of perspective, isn't it? In this scenario, I'd argue that I should reward myself for deleting your number, Zane.

I bite my lip, all the while wishing it were her lips I was touching. She drives me mental.

ZANE

I'd be impressed that you figured out who I am so quickly, but then again, your intellect was always unmatched. You haven't answered my question though, my sweet Celestial. Will you reward me if I'm good to you?

I watch as the text bubbles appear and disappear, my nerves frayed as one minute after another passes, only for it to stop altogether. Is she ignoring me? Fuck.

ZANE

I put your friend on the team that'll be in charge of Bellevue. She'll be in great hands, and she'll learn a lot. No harm will come to her while she works for me, I promise.

My heart pretty much stops for a moment when the text bubbles reappear, indicating that she's typing.

CELESTIAL

Name your price.

I lean back in my desk chair, oddly giddy, despite the fact she's misunderstanding my messages entirely. I didn't text her because I want her to repay me for the favor, especially not after what she did for me by walking away from Chateau Chiara — but I'm not foolish enough to waste an opportunity like this one. With her, I'll take every chance I've got.

Chapter Ten

CELESTE

I'm filled with apprehension as the large gates of the Windsor mansion loom ahead. Part of me is convinced that this is all an elaborate ruse that Zane came up with to humiliate me — it wouldn't be the first time. The closer my car gets, the more certain I become that I'll be denied entry.

I can just imagine the way he'd laugh and mock me. God, I can already see the headline The Herald will come up with: *Celeste Harrison unsuccessfully attempts to break into the Windsor Estate.*

What was I thinking, agreeing to have dinner with him at his house as repayment for hiring Lily? The moment he brought it up, I should've known something was off. Just as my nerves get the best of me and I've convinced myself to turn around, the gates swing open, and someone walks out toward me.

My heart nearly leaps out of my chest when Zane opens the passenger door and invites himself into my car. "Celeste," he says as he buckles himself in, his tone lacking that spiteful lilt it used to have. Instead, he sounds oddly pleasant.

"I... what are you doing?"

He leans back in his seat and tilts his head, a relaxed smile on his face. My heart begins to beat a little faster, and I involuntarily run my eyes over his body. He's in jeans and a black t-shirt tonight, and somehow, he's even more handsome than he is in his expensive suits. The way his arms look

with that cotton stretched over it has me averting my gaze, my cheeks heating.

“The Windsor Estate is large,” he tells me. “I was worried you wouldn’t be able to find my house.”

I bite my lip, nerves dancing across my skin. “If it’s dinner you wanted, we could’ve done that anywhere. Why did you ask me to come here, of all places?”

I can’t shake the feeling I’m being misled. Despite our past, Zane has never made me feel unsafe around him, but a more rational part of me still tends toward caution. I didn’t tell anyone where I was going, because I didn’t know how I’d explain it. Was that a mistake?

“Turn right at the end of the road,” Zane says instead of answering my question, his voice soft, different now. I glance at him to find his expression tinged with frustration. He catches me looking and averts his face, glancing out the window instead.

My eyes widen when a familiar glass structure comes into view. *The greenhouse*, if it can even be called that. It’s more of a glass palace, except all its rooms are entwined with elaborate indoor botanical gardens. In front of it stands a white mansion that wasn’t there years ago, yet it doesn’t look out of place.

“Park there,” Zane says, pointing to a row of supercars in front of his house. “I saved you a spot right by the front door so you wouldn’t have to walk far.”

I do as he asks, my hands trembling as I turn off the ignition. By the time I’ve grabbed my handbag, Zane has already walked around the car and opened my door for me, his expression unreadable.

I gasp as my heels sink into the gravel a little, and he wraps his hand around my shoulder, a soft chuckle escaping his lips. I look up at him, relieved to find him relaxed again. Though I’m uncertain why he looked so lost in the car, I can’t help but feel like I was to blame. I hadn’t considered that he now has more leverage than ever before — if I upset him, there’s every chance he’ll take it out on Lily.

“You’re still so clumsy, Celeste,” he murmurs, snapping me out of my daze.

“It’s not my fault your driveway *sucks*. I can’t be the first woman complaining about this.”

I expected him to let go of me, but instead, his grip merely tightens as he leads me to his front door, his arm wrapped around me. “You are,” he says.

It takes me a moment to realize what he’s referring to, and my mood sinks. “I bet that’s just because every other woman is too polite to voice her thoughts. That gravel must’ve ruined so *many* expensive pairs of shoes.” I shake my head, mentally lamenting the loss women I don’t even know have incurred all because of Zane.

He barks out a laugh and bends down, lifting me into his arms effortlessly. “Celestial, if you want me to carry you, just say so.”

My lips part in shock as he bridges the remaining distance to his front door with me in his arms. “I... I... that’s not what I meant!”

With each step, my body rocks against his, the thin fabric of his t-shirt doing nothing to hide the strength of his abs and arms. He carries me like I weigh nothing, and I can’t help but be reminded of the way he picked me up all those years ago. He carried me then too, through his elaborate gardens.

His arm shifts underneath me as he unlocks his front door with a swipe of his thumb, but he doesn’t put me down once we’re inside. No, he carries me all the way to the kitchen and places me on top of a counter. Then he kneels in front of me and gently grabs my ankle, turning it as he inspects my shoe. “There’s some slight damage,” he says, before looking up at me. “I’ll buy you new shoes, okay? I’m sorry about the gravel.”

I blink in surprise as he straightens and turns to wash his hands. “I was joking,” I reassure him, and he looks over his shoulder, throwing me another one of those smiles that just confuses me.

“I’m not. I’ll buy you new shoes.”

I raise a brow and narrow my eyes. “I’d rather you didn’t. You’d send me something weird just to spite me.”

Zane dries his hands and walks back to me, pausing so we’re at eye level. “I’m no longer the spiteful teenager you left behind, Celeste.” He places his palms flat on either side of me and leans in, his abs pressing against my knees. “I know I framed my request to have dinner with you tonight as a reward for keeping my promise, but truthfully, I just wanted an opportunity to apologize to you — properly and sincerely.”

He’s so close that I can’t help but notice his long lashes, and those lips that felt so soft against mine. Zane grips the kitchen counter tightly,

drawing my gaze to the way his arms flex, and I suck in a breath. “Apologize?”

“Yes,” he replies, his tone solemn. My heart skips a beat when he reaches for me and places his index finger underneath my chin. “I’m sorry, Celeste. I’m sorry for every single mean thing I’ve ever said to you, every time I taunted and teased you, every prank I pulled, and every single time I made you feel like you were anything less than the amazing, intelligent, beautiful, strong woman you are. I apologize for hurting you when we were kids, for taking our rivalry too far.”

He lets go of me and pulls a hand through his hair, the movement familiar and oddly soothing. It’s what he always used to do when he was frustrated, and somehow, I’m glad that hasn’t changed. For reasons I can’t quite decipher, I’m glad I can still read him just a little bit.

After all, the man standing in front of me is one I’m not sure I know anymore — I thought I did, but increasingly, I’m wondering if I’m mistaken. Just like I’ve grown and changed throughout the years, he seems to have as well.

“Thank you,” I murmur. “For the apology. I can’t say I forgive you, Zane, because you truly have hurt me more than you might realize. But we’re not kids anymore, and whether we like it or not, we’ll be seeing a lot of each other in the industry. It’d be best if we put the past behind us and learn to be civil with each other. So far, we seem to be managing that just fine, but I appreciate your apology nonetheless.”

He raises a brow, a soft huff escaping his lips. “*Civil*. Right,” he repeats softly, once again mussing up his hair. It’s just a little longer now, enough to grab and hold on to. I bite down on my lip, blindsided by the memory of my fingers threading through his hair as he kissed my neck, the smell of freshly cut grass invading my senses.

Zane turns to the pan on his stove, and I take a moment to study him. He always had a powerful edge, partially due to his last name, but back then it didn’t drip off him the way it does today. If he wanted to, he could’ve made life and work exceedingly difficult for me, the way he used to. It’s what I expected, and I’m not quite sure what to make of him now.

“Do you still hate anchovies?” he asks, startling me out of my thoughts.

He looks over his shoulder, his gaze filled with something I can’t quite define. “How do you know that I hate anchovies?”

“I’ll take that as a yes,” he murmurs as he begins to boil some pasta. “I won’t use Caesar dressing on tonight’s salad, then. I have some homemade honey and lemon dressing that I think you’ll like.”

How could he possibly know such a small detail about me? I’m pretty sure not even Archer realizes I hate anchovies, and he’s my *brother*. “Can I help with anything?” I ask, aware that I’ve just been staring at him the entire time.

He glances at me and grins. “You could light the candles on the table if you’d like?”

I nod and lift myself off his kitchen counter before heading in the direction he pointed me to, only to find a beautifully decked dining table waiting for me, complete with dozens of flowers I can’t even identify. He set the table so we’re seated perpendicular to each other, each of us on either side of the table’s corner. We’d still be able to face each other, but there’s less distance between us that way than if we were seated opposite each other. Why would he want us sitting so close?

Chapter Eleven

ZANE

Keeping my eyes off her during dinner turned out to be a challenge. The way she moaned when she took a bite of the lamb ragout I made for her would've brought me to my knees if I hadn't been sitting. What would she say if I admit I spent all week perfecting that dish, simply because I know it's her favorite?

"If I hadn't watched you cook most of this food, I'd never have believed you made it," she says as she places her fork down, satisfaction flickering through her beautiful eyes. "It's kind of unfair, you know? Men who look like you shouldn't know how to cook too."

My eyes widen, and my heart skips a beat as I throw her a shy smile. "Men who look like me?"

Celeste's smile drops when she realizes what she just said, and her face flushes beautifully. "I... I... I mean..."

I chuckle. "I'm glad you find me somewhat attractive, at least. That bodes well for my nefarious plans."

She raises a brow, amused. "I see you're still solidly settled in your villain role. You do realize you can't be a true villain if you don't tell me about your plans in detail, ideally while you pet some kind of feline."

I bite back a laugh and resist the urge to make a joke about stroking her pussy. Instead, I lean in, my elbow on the table and my fist underneath my jaw. "Is that so, my sweet Celestial? In that case, you should probably know

that I intend to ask if you'd like dessert, but I know you'll say no, because you don't like sweets. So instead, I'll offer you a sweet dessert wine, and I'll suggest that we go for a walk."

She leans in too, her face so close to mine that I could easily reach out and kiss her. It's been years since she was so relaxed around me. Perhaps it's the wine, but there's something magical about tonight. "Zane," she says, tutting. "That doesn't sound particularly nefarious. You're losing your touch."

I pour the dessert wine I mentioned and hand her a glass. "Let's find out, shall we?"

I offer her my hand, and for a moment, I think she'll reject me, but then her hand slides into mine and she rises from her seat. "This is delicious," she murmurs after taking a sip of the Moscato I selected. I grin as I try my luck and entwine our fingers.

She has no idea how fast my heart is beating when I lead her out the backdoor, nor does she realize just how much I love the feel of her hand in mine. For as long as I can remember, she's made me feel unlike myself, and with each year that passes, it just gets worse.

She gasps when we walk through the glass hallway that connects my house and my mother's observatory. "Where are you taking me?"

I turn to face her and tighten my grip on her hand, walking backward as I pull her along, my eyes on hers. "You don't recognize it? I'll just have to remind you."

Her lips part and her gaze heats. "I meant — why are you taking me to your greenhouse?"

I grin at her as I keep walking backward, my fingers laced with hers. "It's not a greenhouse — my mother would be so mad to hear you call it that if she were around." Her expression softens at the mention of my mother, and her gaze roams over my face in a way that instantly makes me feel vulnerable. "My father built this for her, and she planted almost everything in there herself. Everything she didn't plant, I did. They're botanical gardens inside an observatory, and yeah, it does include a greenhouse too, but it's a bit more than that. It isn't a place I share with anyone else — not even my siblings come in here."

She looks so disarmed, something akin to understanding crossing her face. "You've never mentioned your parents before," she says, her voice soft.

My smile slips, and I face forward to hide my expression from her. Celeste was already deeply entrenched in my life when my parents died, and she has no idea, but it was my rivalry with her that made breathing a little easier on days that felt suffocating. She gave me something to focus on, something that wasn't the loss of my parents and the tough transition to living with my grandmother. It's been years, but it still hurts to think of them, and weakness isn't what I want to show her tonight. We both fall silent as I lead her deeper into the gardens, right back to the spot where I kissed her for the very first time.

"I can't figure you out," she whispers once we're standing in the same rose garden that I carried her to five years ago. "Is this real, Zane? I feel like I'm waiting for the other shoe to drop, and I hate feeling that way. If this is some sort of ploy, I beg of you—"

"It's not," I cut her off, a hint of desperation making its way into my voice. "It's not some sort of scheme, Celeste. I'd be lying if I said I didn't want anything from you, but I don't have any malicious intent. Is it so hard to believe that I couldn't forget about the only girl that's ever challenged me to be better? That I'd want to make amends once I realized how much you'd come to mean to me throughout the years, how much I'd hurt you? I get that I was nothing but a source of torment for you, Celeste... but for me... some days, you were the only reason I kept going. You're the reason I never gave up, even on days I wanted to."

She searches my face — for a trace of insincerity, no doubt. She won't find it. "What do you want from me?" she asks, her voice breaking. "Is this retribution for asking you to forget anything ever happened between us? Is this all just a challenge to you? It feels like you're trying to get me back into your bed just to see if you can."

I look up at the glass ceiling and pull my hand out of hers. "I want it all," I whisper, before looking back at her. Her breath hitches when I take a step closer, my touch gentle as I twirl one of her curls around my finger. "I'm going to lay my cards out on the table and pray you don't eviscerate them, because Celeste... I want to wake up with you lying next to me, so I'm not left wondering if the best night of my life was just a drunken dream. You on my arm at every bullshit event we have to attend, and next to me at every acquisition meeting — or opposite me. So long as you're in the room, I don't care which side you're on. I've always loved competing with you, after all."

Her eyes widen in disbelief, but I don't let that discourage me. "I want to take you on a date and show you what we could be like, you and me. I can't have been the only one who felt it — not just that night, but all these years. This thing between us... I don't know what it is, but I can tell you it certainly isn't hatred. Don't you want to find out what it is, what we could be? Has the thought truly never crossed your mind?"

"It would never work," she murmurs. "Our families would never allow it." It's true — my grandmother hates her grandfather with a passion. She refuses to tell me what happened between them, but with each year that passes, her hatred for the Harrisons grows. More than once, she's ordered me to destroy their company altogether. If not for Celeste, I would have.

I let Celeste's hair slip through my fingers and cup her cheek, keeping her eyes on me. "What I'm not hearing is that you've never wondered, Celestial." My thumb brushes over her lips, and she parts them, exhaling shakily. "Admit that you want me, too."

My body brushes against hers, and I lean in, lowering my head to hers. "Tell me you haven't wondered what it'd be like to kiss me now, as the adults we are. Tell me you haven't thought of me and wanted more of what we did that night. Can you look me in the eye and lie to me?"

"Zane," she whispers, my name a plea on her lips.

I dip my head, and my nose brushes against her. Her sharp intake of breath sends liquid desire running down my spine, and when she places her palm against my chest, my brain nearly ceases to function. "I'd like to find out whether you taste as sweet as you do in my memories, whether you can still take my cock as good as you did back then. Fuck, I want my name on your lips while I make you come harder and faster than I did on prom night. One chance to show you I'm no longer the inexperienced virgin I was back then. That's what I want. Tell me you want that too."

She tilts her head and leans in, her lips brushing against mine softly. "I've always hated you," she whispers against my mouth. "I still do," she says, right before grabbing the fabric of my t-shirt and clenching her fist around it to pull me closer.

I go willingly, my hand finding its way into her curls as my lips crash against hers. She moans, and I run my hand down her body as I fucking devour her, kissing her with unbridled desperation, and she returns my desire tenfold. Celeste moans when I suck her bottom lip in between my

teeth and bite down softly. “Do you hate the way I kiss you? The way you’re kissing me back?”

She wraps her arms around my neck before rising to her tiptoes and pressing her body flush against mine. “I hate every second of it,” she lies as she tangles her fingers into my hair, gripping tightly as she pulls my mouth back to hers.

I lift her into my arms, and her legs wrap around my waist seconds before I push her against one of the Roman pillars in the observatory, pulling back just long enough to see where I’m going. “Then you’ll really hate the feel of my cock against you, Celestial,” I whisper, my hips rolling against her in a way that draws the sexiest little moan from her throat. “Still so fucking perfect for me,” I murmur before recapturing her lips, my touch softer now in an attempt to savor the moment.

“What are we doing?” Celeste asks in between kisses, her voice pained.

I pull back to look at her, my forehead dropping to hers. We’re both panting and holding on to each other like we’re scared this moment will disappear. Standing here with her, in the same place as five years ago... it makes me feel vulnerable, like I’m laying my soul bare for her. It’s the least she deserves.

Celeste untangles her hands from my hair and places them on my shoulders instead, almost like she’s trying to determine whether she should push me away. “This is a bad idea.”

I grin at her, unable to deny it. “The worst,” I whisper back, before leaning in to kiss her slowly, tenderly. She sighs when I pull away, the longing in her eyes mirroring my own. “Just tell me you’ll go on a date with me. We don’t have to overthink it, Celestial. Just give me one chance to show you what it could be like between us.”

“Just one?”

I nod. “Just one.”

Chapter Twelve

CELESTE

I look up in surprise when a man wearing the ugliest yellow suit walks into my office, holding a potted plant and what appears to be a shoebox. “*Ms. Harrison,*” he says, smiling. “I’ve got a delivery for you.”

My eyes run down his suit, and I frown. It’s yellow with tiny pink stars all over it, and my first thought is *why?* Who designed this, and who in their right mind would actually wear it? I clear my throat awkwardly. “I’m sorry, but who are you?”

He grins as he carefully places both the plant pot and the shoe box on the edge of my desk before reaching into his inner suit jacket. My eyes widen when I realize the lining is bright pink. It’s... *a lot.*

“My name is Mike Mitchells,” he says as he hands me his business card. I tense, recognizing the name. “I’m Zane Windsor’s secretary.”

I raise a brow and cross my arms. “And how, pray tell, did you get into the building?” I’m pretty sure that anyone even remotely affiliated with Windsor Hotels is banned from coming anywhere near our offices.

“I’m extremely good at my job, Ms. Harrison. My boss told me to deliver this to you, so that’s what I did.”

“Not an answer, Mike.”

He smiles at me adorably, but that doesn’t hide the cunning look in his eyes. From what I know, he’s been working for Zane for years now. There’s

no way he could've lasted that long if he isn't incredibly smart. "I was also told to hand you this card personally."

I take the sealed envelope from him, my heart skipping a beat when I notice Zane's handwriting on the front. *Celestial*, it's addressed to.

Dear Celeste,

I hope you enjoy the Lily of the Valley that I planted for you. It's from the observatory I took you to last week, and they were always meant for you. Just like we do, Lily of the Valley has a long history.

In the Victorian era, they represented a return to happiness, but in ancient times, they represented the goddess Ostara. The perfect plant for my own goddess, don't you think?

More recently, this beautiful plant has been associated with apologies and a fresh start if that apology is well received. That's what this is — a reminder that my apology was sincere, and that I want nothing more than a fresh start with you.

PS. Since they're so fragrant, it is my hope that you'll think of me each time you smell them, because I certainly haven't stopped thinking about the way it felt to kiss you again.

- ZW

I can't keep the smile off my face, and it doesn't go unnoticed by Mike. His expression is carefully blank, but he fails to hide that calculating look in his eyes. I clear my throat and nod at him politely. "Please express my gratitude to your boss," I tell him, my voice sounding a little more flustered than I'd have liked.

He smiles at me before stepping away, only to pause at the door and throw me a knowing look. "I'll see you around, Ms. Harrison."

I narrow my eyes as he walks out, mildly annoyed by his audacity and insinuation. I bet Zane's attitude rubbed off on him.

I sigh happily as I reach for the shoebox, only for my lips to part in shock when I see what's inside — the most beautiful black satin pumps

adorned with small white gemstones in shapes reminiscent of the galaxy, and the word Celestial on the inner soles. I take a closer look and freeze when I realize that some of the stones aren't crystals at all... they're *diamonds*.

I carefully examine them, but can't find a brand anywhere. There's nothing but the small outline of a raven on the bottom. He clearly had these custom made for me, and I can't help but wonder about his intentions.

He seemed serious when he apologized, and I can't deny that he seemed nothing like the mean boy he'd been, but part of me is still scared to trust him. My experience with him makes me fear that this truly is an elaborate ruse, one that might not even be aimed at me personally, but rather at Harrison Developments.

I raise the tips of my fingers to my lips, my eyes fluttering closed as I think of the way he kissed me. He couldn't have faked that look in his eyes, could he? Could this be real?

This thing between us... I don't know what it is, but I can tell you it certainly isn't hatred. Don't you want to find out what it is, what we could be? Has the thought truly never crossed your mind?

I haven't wanted to admit it, but underneath all my hatred for him, there's always been something more. At first, it was a need for acceptance and wanting him to admit that I'm just as good as he is, if not better. As the years passed, it turned into something more, something a little darker, a little more illicit.

When was the first time I imagined Zane ending one of our countless arguments with a kiss? I must've been sixteen, and the thought had horrified me, but it wouldn't leave me either.

By the time he laid me down in his beautiful observatory, I'd already wanted him far longer than he could've possibly suspected. It wasn't rational, my need for him. It felt like my body and mind were at odds with each other each time I found myself daydreaming about him, but I couldn't stop either.

I'd be lying if I said being with him never crossed my mind. For years, I wondered what it'd be like if he didn't hate me, didn't provoke me. More than once, I wondered what it'd be like to have his undivided attention in an entirely different way — not as his rival, but as a girl he *wanted*.

My hand trembles as I reach for my phone, unsure of what to do. It'd be impolite not to thank him, right? I bite down on my lip, hesitating. If this is

all a ploy, I'm not sure I'll recover.

The phone only rings once before he picks up. "*Celestial*," he says, his voice deep and pleased, like he'd been expecting my call.

I hesitate a beat and tighten my grip on the phone. "Thank you," I murmur. "For the beautiful lilies and the shoes. It's... Zane, it's too much."

He chuckles, and the sound cascades over me, driving the butterflies in my stomach wild. "It's nothing, Celeste. I told you I'd buy you new shoes, didn't I? I'm going to keep every promise I make you, every vow, until you realize you truly can trust me."

I lean back in my seat, feeling conflicted. "Where did you get the shoes?" I ask, in an attempt to turn to a lighter topic. "They're beautiful."

I hear some shuffling on the other end of the phone, like he's putting some work aside to speak to me. "One of my friends designed them for you. She's an up-and-coming designer, and I just knew she'd be able to capture what I had in mind. I'm glad you like them. They're worth a fortune based on the materials, but someday, when she makes it as big as I think she will, they'll be a collector's item for sure."

He sounds so proud of this woman, and it does something unexpected to me — it fills me with hot, searing jealousy. "So you saw an opportunity to support her without being blatant about it and took it. That's so nice of you," I say, my tone sharper than intended.

Zane falls quiet for a moment, and then he laughs, the sound light and melodious. "You're jealous," he says, his tone filled with wonder. "Of a woman that genuinely is like a sister to me."

I part my lips in outrage. "I most certainly am *not*," I snap, instantly agitated. I shouldn't have called him, and really, I should just hang up, but instead, I find myself holding my phone a little tighter.

"Let me take you on a date next Sunday. That fresh start I mentioned? I've waited for it longer than you can imagine. Don't make me wait even longer, Celestial. Please."

I blink in surprise, my heart racing. "I can't on Sunday," I murmur, my tone filled with regret. "Truly. I promised my mom I'd spend the day with her. The week after, though... I'm free then."

What am I doing? I should take his apology and consider it closure, but once again, I'm letting Zane pull me into something that can only be described as *trouble*.

“It’s a date,” he says, and I try my hardest to suppress a smile. I might very well have lost my mind.

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Chapter Thirteen

CELESTE

“How much longer are you going to stay at Mom and Dad’s?” my brother asks over video chat, and Mom gasps as she snatches her tablet out of my hands to glare at Archer. It’s a silly move on his part, to ask that during our weekly cooking lesson with Mom. It’s a tradition we started when Archer left home and I moved to London for college, and it quickly made Saturday my favorite day of the week.

“Archer Harrison! Don’t you encourage your sister to move out,” Mom chastises.

I shake my head at him from behind her before mouthing *soon*. I’ve been looking at houses, but none of them have been quite right. It won’t be much longer now, though. Every viewing makes it easier to determine what I want.

I grin at Archer as Mom lectures him, and he throws me a pained stare. This is what I love most about our cooking lessons — it kept us close despite being so far apart.

“Instead of telling your sister to leave home, you should be joining her here,” Mom yells at him. “Don’t make me drag you back, Archer. I will not spend another Thanksgiving without both of my kids with me.”

His expression falls, and I sigh. Since leaving, he’s come home twice — both times it was for Mom’s birthday. If there’s even a slight chance of Grandpa being here, he won’t come. Mom knows that as well as I do.

Grandpa refused to let Archer run his current company on the side while working for him, and it resulted in an ultimatum that didn't pan out the way I think Grandpa expected. Archer chose his own company and followed his dreams, even if it meant being disowned, and it's something I'll always respect him for, despite the resulting rift in our family.

"What's going on in here?" Dad asks as he leads Lily into the kitchen, both of their arms filled with fresh rhubarb for our pie. "We left for ten minutes to pick these, and you managed to upset your mother?"

Archer shoots me a helpless look, and I pretend not to see it. "Instead of always lecturing me, why aren't you telling off Lily?" he says, tipping his head toward her. "I heard you joined the enemy, Blondie?"

I let my eyes fall closed for a moment, surprised at his stupidity. Surely by now he's learned that deflecting Mom's anger never works in his favor? Mom wraps her arm around Lily and narrows her eyes. "You're one to talk. Lily still works in the industry, and she has every intention of joining Harrison Developments in a few years. Can you say the same?"

Lily stares at me wide-eyed, confused as to why she got caught up in our argument, and I merely shrug. In the last ten years, she's pretty much become one of us. She's been there for every cooking session while we were in London, but she still isn't quite used to the way we argue and make up so quickly.

I can hardly blame her for it — her house is always quiet, and her dad is rarely home. She isn't used to the constant shouting, and she never knows quite what to do with herself when things get as loud as they are right now.

"How *has* it been?" I ask quietly. I've barely spoken to her since she started work, but if I'm truly honest with myself, I've purposely kept myself from asking. I don't know how to bring up Zane without spilling all of my secrets.

"Work is really good," she says, guilt flickering through her eyes. Lily won't admit it, but all of her applications being rejected hurt her deeply. She's taken such pride in working for Windsor Hotels, even if she's trying not to let it show. I can't take that away from her. She can't find out that Zane hired her because of me, but the secrets I'm keeping from her are weighing heavy.

It isn't just everything that happened recently that I'm keeping from her, and I know it'll hurt her to find out I have so many secrets when she shares everything with me. Lily thinks I never went to prom because I had a

migraine, and at the time, I'd been too ashamed to admit what really happened.

I didn't have the heart to tell her that my date never picked me up, and that I went by myself, only to find him kissing the girl that ended up becoming prom queen seconds after walking in. I never told her that Zane grabbed my hand and led me out of there, because I hadn't wanted to revisit the pain Jason inflicted, and I could barely believe what happened between Zane and me. As time went on, it became something I left in the past... until the past caught up to me.

"The training scheme is so comprehensive, and I..." She looks up, visibly hesitating. "I was put on the Bellevue project."

My chest tightens for a moment, and I look away. "Oh. That's wonderful," I murmur, but it doesn't come out the way I'd intended it to — it doesn't sound sincere. How could it, when this isn't new information to me? Zane told me about this nearly three weeks ago.

"He's... he's a good boss," she tries to tell me. "He's different now, I think."

I nod, unsure what to say. "Speaking of Zane, there's something I need to tell you."

I have to find a way to tell her everything that's happened in the last couple of weeks without making her feel like she didn't earn her job.

She raises a brow. "Oh god, what did he do now? I'm not above sabotaging him at work, you know? I don't even care. There's no way I'll let him get away with messing with you ever again."

"No, nothing like that. I'll tell you later," I whisper, glancing at my parents. It'll be hard enough to explain to Lily that I kissed *Zane Windsor*, my mortal enemy. The last thing I need is for my parents to overhear me.

She nods as Mom glances over. "Celeste. Don't forget about brunch tomorrow, okay? You promised me a late birthday date. I know work is busy and Grandpa is putting a lot of pressure on you, but you can manage to take a Sunday off."

"Yes, Mom." She's reminded me of her birthday brunch no less than three times just this week. I couldn't forget if I tried.

"You promised me a date too," she says, turning to Lily next, and they begin to discuss their restaurant options just as my phone buzzes.

My heart skips a beat when Zane's name flashes across my screen, and I quickly swipe my phone off the counter, heat rushing to my cheeks. There's

something so illicit about texting him in a room full of people who witnessed our rivalry. If I tried telling Archer that I'm going on a date with Zane Windsor, he'd laugh it off, convinced I'm messing with him.

IN-ZANE

Each time I close my eyes, I think of the way your body felt against mine. I haven't been able to focus on anything but you. Tell me that kiss is seared into your memories the way it is in mine, Celestial.

He's been texting me non-stop since I agreed to go on a date with him, and there's something truly exhilarating about it. It feels like I'm getting to know him all over again — he's both familiar and entirely novel, and I'm enjoying discovering the parts I didn't know about. It hasn't been easy to let go of my old resentment, but each time doubt creeps in, I remind myself of the way he looks at me these days. I doubt he could fake that. Maybe this thing between us is only physical, but he's right. I do want to know what it is... what it'd be like to be *his*.

I bite my lip as I re-read his text, only for it to remind me of the way he pulled my lip in between his teeth before kissing me.

CELESTE

My memory seems to fail me today... you'll need to show me what it was like all over again, just to be sure.

IN- ZANE

Fuck, Celestial. You have no idea what I'd give to have your lips on mine right now. I can't believe I have to wait another 7 days until I see you again.

I smile as I pull my phone to my chest. Never in my wildest dreams did I think I'd one day find myself eager to see Zane Windsor, of all people. Yet here I am, counting down the days. I just hope I don't come to regret giving him the chance he asked for.

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Chapter Fourteen

CELESTE

I frown in frustration as Mom declines my call for the third time in a row. She's never late for anything, and I'm growing increasingly concerned.

"Celeste?"

I look up from my phone to find a vaguely familiar-looking man walking up to me, his expression a mixture of sheepish and apologetic.

"I'm really sorry about this, but I believe our mothers set both of us up."

I stare at him for a moment, my eyes roaming over his dark blonde hair and his perfect bone structure. I'm certain I know him, but I can't quite place him.

"We met when we were much younger, and we briefly spoke at the annual Windsor charity gala recently?" He cups the back of his neck awkwardly, his face tinged pink.

"Oh!" I gasp, embarrassment washing over me. "Clifton Emerson, right?" I can't believe I didn't recognize him straight away. The Emersons are hoteliers too — they're not quite as big as we are, but they're a force to be reckoned with. Clifton, however, isn't someone I've seen around. As far as I'm aware, he chose not to join his father's business.

"I'm so glad you remember me," he says, throwing me a sweet smile. "I feel awkward enough as it is."

My phone buzzes, and I glance at it to find a text from my mother. My eyes narrow as I read it.

MOM

You promised me a date for my birthday, but I never said it'd be with me. Have fun! He's a great guy.

I hold my phone up for Clifton to see, and he chuckles knowingly. "Told you," he murmurs, before showing me a similar message his own mother sent him.

"I can't believe they duped us like that. I should've known when she reminded me of today's brunch more often than necessary," I mutter, annoyed.

Clifton runs a hand through his hair, and just like that, I'm involuntarily reminded of Zane. My cheeks heat at the memory of his touch, and the way his hair felt against my fingers as I deepened the kiss I claimed I hated. I could've been with him now, if not for Mom. What would she say if I told her that? Grandpa might hate the Windsors, but I don't think my parents do.

I shake my head when I realize I'm getting ahead of myself. This thing between Zane and I... we don't even know what it is yet, and I'm not convinced he isn't just trying to get me out of his system. Perhaps what we're feeling is the lingering effect of a years-long rivalry, something that'll fade away over time, something that's best kept secret lest we complicate things more than we already have.

"I'll definitely be having words with my mother," Clifton tells me. "However, now that we've both found ourselves here, we might as well have lunch. This restaurant is incredibly hard to book, after all." He grins at me, looking far more relaxed now. "If nothing else, I'd love to get some pointers from you about working with family."

I raise a brow and throw him a questioning look. "You're joining Emerson Real Estate?" This is news to me. Emerson does well, but Greg, Clifton's father, is stuck in his ways and refuses to adapt to the change the industry is undergoing. I don't know Clifton all that well, but I heard he's been advocating for change in his father's firm. If he joined, it must be because his father finally gave in.

Clifton nods, his gaze conflicted. "I am, which is why I'd be grateful if you'd have lunch with me. I'm worried I'm making the wrong choice, and since you're kind of in my shoes, I figured... well... I just thought it might be nice for both of us to have someone to talk to who actually gets it."

I'd planned to leave once I figured out what my mother was up to, but how do I turn down such an earnest request? If he truly is joining his

father's business, I won't just be seeing him around. I'll be competing with him. Whether I like it or not, I'll have to try my best to stay on good terms with him.

"I'm not sure I'll be of much help to you, since that specific aspect of the job is something I'm still actively figuring out too, but it wouldn't hurt to discuss it. Who knows, perhaps we might figure out the solution to our stubborn predecessors together."

Clifton smiles at me as he leads me into the restaurant, his expression conveying that he too has little faith in our ability to understand my grandfather and his father, and I can't help but smile back at him conspiratorially.

"I heard the fish is amazing here," he tells me as our server leads us to the table, and I nod, having heard the same rumors.

"I wonder how long ago our moms set this up, because as far as I'm aware, this restaurant is always fully booked for at least five weeks ahead of time."

His expression sours as we sit down, and I can't help but giggle in solidarity. "I can't believe they did this at all. Perhaps it isn't my father and your grandfather that we need to manage — it's our moms."

I begin to reply, only for my smile to melt away as a familiar deep voice cuts through the noise. My stomach drops as my gaze settles on a couple three tables away. I'd recognize him anywhere.

My entire body freezes as I watch Zane smile adoringly at a well-known model, and it hits me then — how foolish I've been. He warned me he was playing a game with me when we danced at the gala, told me it's one I wasn't aware of.

She says something, and he laughs in a way I've never seen him laugh before — carefree, his entire attention on her, like he's hanging on to her every word. Jealousy grips me hard and fast, tightening my stomach until my entire body is on edge. It hurts more than I thought it would, more than it should.

She's so beautiful, pure sophistication dripping off her, and they look perfect together. I can't tear my eyes off them as my mind replays every word he told me. I think that's what hurts the most — the fact I truly had started to believe him.

"Celeste? Is everything okay?" Clifton asks, following my line of vision.

I nod and force myself to glance at the menu despite the words barely registering. Does she know he kissed me less than two weeks ago, that he's been texting me constantly? What would she do if I walked up to them and told her exactly what kind of person her date is? For a moment, I genuinely consider it, only to realize that it'll just make me look even more pathetic than I already am.

"Celeste?" Clifton says, and I glance at him to find him placing his order, concern flickering through his gaze.

I tense, feeling entirely out of it. "Could I please have whatever he is having?" I ask, tipping my head toward Clifton. I haven't been able to interpret a single word I read, and the way Clifton looks at me tells me he caught on.

"I heard that the Windsors and Harrisons don't like each other, but I thought the rumors were exaggerated," he says as our server walks away. "I've never seen such a visceral reaction in real life. The moment you saw him, your entire mood just turned. I can hardly blame you. They're just... everywhere, aren't they? It's impossible to compete with them."

I force a smile and take a calming breath, unwilling to let Zane upset me. I won't let him affect me like that, not anymore. "You get used to it," I tell Clifton honestly. "More often than not, the Windsors focus on projects that aren't in my budget anyway, so they don't affect me as much as I thought they would."

I don't mention the Bellevue. That was one project I wanted desperately, and now I can't help but wonder if Zane had somehow known that, if that's why he acquired it. He seemed sincere about Chateau Chiara, but what about the Bellevue? When he told me I didn't know which game we were playing, I thought he'd been joking, only to find myself scrambling to figure out the rules.

I glance back at Zane, only to find him already staring at me, his expression hard. His eyes move from me to Clifton, and then he looks away, dismissing me like I'm nothing.

I try my hardest to push down the pain. It shouldn't hurt as much as it does — I spent years letting him hurt me, and I promised myself I'd never let him do this to me again, so how did I find myself here?

"Excuse me," I murmur as I rise from my seat, needing a moment to collect myself.

I never should've let him kiss me, never should've fallen for it when he told me he just wanted a chance to show me who he's become. No one knows him like I do — I should've trusted the behavior he's shown me all our lives over his pretty lies. When it comes to him, I'm still the same naive girl I used to be, and I'm tired of hating who I become around him. I hate the insecurity, the doubts, the way he makes me feel so vulnerable.

“Celeste.” A hand wraps around my wrist moments before I'm pulled against a strong chest, and I gasp in shock as Zane presses me up against the wall opposite the restrooms, his eyes flashing with anger so fierce it rivals my own.

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Chapter Fifteen

ZANE

“What’s wrong?” Raven asks, but her words barely register as my eyes zero in on Celeste. She told me she’d be spending time with her *mother* today, and the person sitting opposite her most certainly is not her mother.

“Zane, you’re worrying me. I’ve never seen you look so... so...”

I glance back at Raven and force a blank look onto my face. “It’s nothing,” I assure her, but that doesn’t stop her from following my line of vision.

“Who is she?”

Not who I thought she was. Why would she lie to me? Who is he? Celeste glances my way, and she tenses when our eyes meet. I expected to see a hint of guilt, or perhaps even shock at finding me here, but all I see is that same old haughty disdain she’s always thrown my way.

I look away, unable to take it.

“So that’s her, huh? The girl you’ve always been in love with.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, Rave,” I deny as I pop my favorite peppermint candy into my mouth — a nervous habit I developed when I stopped smoking.

She chuckles and leans in. “I always wondered who she was — the girl that’s kept Zane Windsor on his toes for years. She’s ridiculously pretty, and her hair is stunning.”

“She’s also on a date with someone else,” I snap, unable to keep my composure.

Raven’s gaze travels back to Celeste, and she shakes her head. “They don’t have chemistry. I wouldn’t worry about it.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose, unsure what to do. When Celeste rises from her seat and rushes toward the restrooms, the decision is made for me.

“Don’t overreact,” Raven warns as I stalk after Celeste, her words falling on deaf ears.

“*Celeste.*” My hand wraps around her wrist and I pull her against my chest, my eyes on hers as I turn us around, trapping her against the wall.

She glares up at me, not the least bit intimidated as I pin her arms above her head, my body pressed against hers. “*Zane.*”

I hate how fucking beautiful she is, how her body feels against mine. She looks gorgeous today in that tight white dress — all for him, no doubt. “Who the fuck is he?”

She cranes her neck to look at me, and I’m surprised by the force of her anger. Why is *she* mad? “How dare you ask me that when you couldn’t even take your eyes off that model for *two seconds*?”

I blink in disbelief, a hint of amusement taking the edge off my anger. “You’re jealous.” I smile at her, intensely fucking pleased. If she didn’t care about me at all, she wouldn’t have been jealous. “Whatever you think is happening there is all in your head, Celestial. Raven and I are just waiting for my sister to join us, that’s all. I’m not even alone with her. She’s my sister’s best friend.”

“Raven?” Something akin to insecurity flickers across her face. “How interesting — it just so happens there’s a raven on the back of the shoes you gave me. She designed them, didn’t she?”

I nod slowly, unsure what to make of the turmoil in her eyes. “I told you, didn’t I? She’s like a sister to me. Truly. She’s hopelessly in love with my eldest brother and due to be engaged to him soon.”

Her eyes widen, and her anger drains away, leaving only uncertainty, like she isn’t quite sure she believes me. “Who is he?” I ask again, my voice softer now. “Tell me your reason for being here with him when you told me you were going out with your mother is equally justifiable. Tell me he’s your cousin, because I *know* that isn’t Archer.”

Celeste’s body relaxes against mine, and she searches my face. What for, I’m not sure. “It’s not a date, Zane.”

I drop my forehead to hers and inhale shakily. “Then you’ll have no problem telling me who he is.”

My nose brushes against hers, and she tilts her face, bringing her lips closer to mine. “Why would I need to justify anything I do to *you*? You don’t own me.”

“You’re protective of him,” I whisper, jealousy settling in the pit of my stomach.

Celeste arches her back and presses into me, her breathing uneven. “It’s not protectiveness. I just know how crazy you are. I don’t like that look in your eyes, and I won’t put him in harm’s way when he’s innocent. You’ll just have to trust me when I tell you he’s *no one*, and this isn’t a date.”

My eyes drop to her lips, and for a moment, I wonder if she’s kissed anyone else since I last held her this way. I was so certain that we were on the same page, that she truly had given me a chance.

“You’re wrong, you know?” I whisper as I lean in, my lips brushing against hers. “I might not own you, *per se*, but you belong with me.”

She exhales shakily as I capture her lips, my touch lingering and entirely in contrast to the harshness of my words. She pushes against my hands, and I let go of her wrists. I figured she’d push me away, but instead, her arms wrap around my neck, and she pulls me closer, kisses me harder.

“You’re still as unreasonable as ever,” she says, nipping at my bottom lip angrily. My hand wraps into her hair, and I kiss her roughly, my touch becoming punishing and utterly possessive. This kiss isn’t like the one that came before it — it tells her everything she refuses to acknowledge, that she’s mine as much as I am hers. She just doesn’t know it yet.

Celeste moans, and I push my peppermint candy into her mouth, my tongue tangling with hers. She sucks down on it, her fingers closing around the lapel of my suit jacket.

It takes all of me, but I manage to pull away from her, my back straightening as I stare her down. “Suck on that as you sit opposite your date, and think about everything we could’ve been, everything you chose to walk away from before even giving us a chance.”

“*Zane*,” she says, her voice breaking.

I falter for a moment, but then I shake my head and take a step away from her. “*Honesty*, Celeste. If you can’t even give me that, then what chance do we stand?”

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Chapter Sixteen

ZANE

I watch as my eldest brother, Ares, shuffles a deck of cards on his front porch. A year ago, our youngest brother, Lexington, insisted on a monthly poker night when we realized we were all growing apart more than we'd liked as we started our careers. Every month, one of us hosts, and tonight it's Ares's turn.

Normally, poker night is the highlight of my week, but tonight I'd rather be in my observatory. I'd rather surround myself with the plants my mother left me, and the ones I'm trying to breed myself. It's an unpredictable process, crafting new flower varieties, but at the same time, it's systematic and scientific. Tonight, more than anything, I want to immerse myself in something that'll keep my thoughts off Celeste.

"Dion said his flight got in late, so we'll just start without him," Ares says, and I hum noncommittally. Part of the reason I love poker night so much is that we all get to see Dion, who lives in London and takes care of our foreign assets. I'd never admit it, but he's probably my favorite brother — out of all of us, he and I are most similar. I wouldn't dream of confiding in any of my brothers about what happened with Celeste, but if I did, it'd be Dion I'd want to talk to.

"What's wrong with you?" Lex asks me, and I blink in surprise when I realize the cards have been dealt and I didn't even pick mine up. "You've been weirdly quiet for a few weeks now."

Luca chuckles, a knowing look in his eyes. “What do you think?” he says, his tone taunting. “It’s Celeste Harrison, of course. You should’ve seen him when she walked into the annual gala a few months ago. I nearly shielded Valentina’s eyes for fear he’d come at the mere sight of Celeste, right there and then. He’s been like this ever since.”

I punch his arm in annoyance as Ares and Lex burst out laughing. Just hearing her name grates on me.

“Raven said you two saw her at brunch three weeks ago and apparently you lost your shit because she was on a date with someone else?” Ares mentions.

Fucking Raven. “Can we just play?” I ask as I pick up my cards. I was so sure Celeste would reach out to offer an explanation, but week after week passed without so much as a single text from her, and for once, I don’t want to be the person who reaches out first. Ever since she came back, I’ve done all I could to show my sincerity, but I can’t just force something into existence when this thing between us is so obviously one-sided. I need her to give me something, *anything* — just one sign to indicate that she wants this too, that she wants me to fight for her.

Ares chuckles at my expense, and I raise a brow as I glance at him. “Should we discuss why our little sister’s best friend is even telling you things like that? Aren’t you awfully close to a girl that’s a decade younger than you? Fucking pervert,” I snap, knowing full-well that Grandma is actively arranging Ares and Raven’s marriage. I can’t resist baiting Ares, though. Talking about Raven is the easiest way to rile him up and change the subject. He’s far more obsessed with her than he even realizes.

Sadly, he’s saved from replying when Dion walks in, his best friend, Xavier Kingston, in tow. We take our family traditions surprisingly seriously, yet there are a few exceptions. Xavier is one of them. I’m not even sure how it happened — one day Dion brought him with him, and he seems to have invited himself ever since. The Kingstons and Windsors aren’t exactly on friendly terms, but we tolerate Xavier. It has a lot more to do with Dion, to be fair. He is quiet and carries demons he thinks we’re unaware of, and Xavier seems to get that, supporting him in a way we can’t.

“Why does it look like we walked into some juicy gossip?” Xavier asks, as he takes a seat.

Dion frowns too, curiosity flickering in his eyes. “What did I miss?” he asks, and I instantly feel guilty. With him living so far away, I’d hate for

him to feel like we're excluding him even more than we already do, but there's no way I'm rehashing the conversation.

"Just discussing Zane's obsession with Celeste Harrison," Lex quips, and I let my eyes fall closed. I'm fucked. They won't let this go.

"I thought you hated Celeste?" Dion asks.

"Yeah, I distinctly remember you asking me to help break into her locker to plant all kinds of shit when we were in high school," Lex adds. "Didn't you nearly get her kicked out a few times?"

Fuck. Even Lex remembers how much of a fucking dick I was to her. If he can't forget, how can I expect Celeste to?

Luca chuckles and shakes his head. "Isn't there a saying about that? What is it? There's a thin line between love and hate? Or something about boys teasing girls they like?"

I put my cards down on the table and lean back in my seat, annoyed. "There's nothing going on between me and her. She hated me in high school, and that hasn't changed. End of story."

They all stare at me, each of their expressions thoughtful. "Huh," Ares says. "You actually have it bad for her."

Luca purses his lips and nods. "I knew the moment I saw you dance with her. You look at her the way Sierra looks at Grandma's cookies."

I roll my eyes and pull another card, unsure how to change the subject. I'm tired and discouraged today — I don't have the energy to entertain them.

"Speaking of Grandma," Dion says, his tone careful. "You know she'll never allow this, right? None of us have a choice in who we'll end up with. We'll all be in arranged marriages, Zane. Isn't it better to just let go of this fixation on her while you still can?"

I sigh and curl my tongue around my peppermint candy, feeling even more restless now than before. "Celeste's family are hoteliers too," I reply, voicing my deepest, most hidden thoughts for the first time. "It isn't impossible. If they were open to a merger, it could work."

"Fuck," Xavier says. "You're thinking of *marrying* the girl? What the fuck? Does she even like you?"

She liked me just fine when I kissed her in my observatory, twice. Didn't seem to hate the way I kissed her against the wall either.

Lex shakes his head and gets up to pour me a whiskey, neat. I knock it back instantly, already tired of my brothers' shit.

“Zane,” Ares says, his tone cautious. “Had it been anyone else, it might’ve been okay, but it can never be her. Grandma would never allow you to be with a Harrison — not after everything they’ve put us through. For years now, Celeste’s grandfather has been poaching our staff, sabotaging deals, and just outright slandering Grandma left and right. Had it been anyone else equally suitable, she might have been inclined to hear you out, but Celeste? The only way you’d ever marry her is if you walked away from your inheritance. Knowing that, wouldn’t it be best to just let things be?”

“Perhaps.” It’s true that us being together would be too difficult, too costly. Except my feelings for her aren’t rational — they never have been. She’s like a drug to me. I know I’m better off without her, but I can’t resist her either. I crave Celeste Harrison with every breath, every heartbeat. It’s no longer a matter of choice — she’s in my fucking veins, infecting my heart.

“It doesn’t matter anyway,” I murmur as I draw another two cards. “There’s nothing between us. There never has been.”

My brothers and Xavier look at me like they don’t believe me, and fuck, I’m not even sure I believe it myself.

“There are so many women that are far better for you,” Xavier says carefully. “Maybe all you need to do is give one of them a chance. Hell, if nothing else, you should just try to fuck Celeste out of your system.”

I grimace. Fuck her out of my system? Maybe. I’ve never been with anyone but her, and perhaps that’s why I’m so fucking obsessed with her. One way or another, I need to forget about her. The blank slate I’d hoped for doesn’t exist, and I can’t erase our history.

Chapter Seventeen

CELESTE

“This one ticks all your boxes,” Lily says as we walk through the house we’re viewing. “It’s close to your office, has a large garden and a big private driveway, a stunning kitchen, a beautiful pool, and plenty of bedrooms. All this natural light is beautiful too. You barely have to renovate anything at all, maybe just a bit of paint here and there.”

I nod absentmindedly. Out of everything we’ve seen, this is the only one I’ve requested to view twice, yet somehow, I can’t bring myself to be excited about it. All I can think about is the look in Zane’s eyes when he saw me with Clifton. It’s been six weeks, and I haven’t been able to forget about it. The argument we had was a perfect reminder of why us being together is a bad idea, but I still can’t let go, even though this is the perfect opportunity to.

I’ve never seen him look so angry — he’s always had a temper, but despite our feud, it’s never been directed at me like that. He seemed hurt, disappointed in me, and I’m not sure what to make of it. To say that I struggle to trust Zane would be an understatement.

I’ve never been more scared of putting my faith in the wrong person. Zane has always been sly, and I’m terrified that giving in to my feelings will leave me holding the pieces he shattered. He’s come so close to breaking me so many times throughout the years — I’d never survive if I’m the one who hands him everything he needs to destroy me.

“God, this kitchen is just... everything,” Lily says, sighing as she twirls around, the biggest grin on her face. I try my hardest to match her energy, but all I can think about is Zane standing in this kitchen, his broad back to me as I sit on the kitchen island while he cooks, the scenario similar to the one at his house. My heart begins to race at the thought of him looking over his shoulder and smiling at me. I try my hardest to clear my head, but I can’t stop thinking about him for more than a few seconds.

Should I have explained who Clifton was? My instincts told me not to — that telling him anything at all would result in Zane targeting Clifton the way he used to target *me*. It’s obvious that Zane wants something from me, and he won’t stand for anyone getting in his way.

What terrifies me most is knowing that I should run from Zane... but I don’t want to. Perhaps I’m a glutton for punishment, but something about Zane enthalls me. Maybe it’s the knowledge that the man who used to torment me now wants me, but I’m worried it’s not that simple.

When I look into his eyes, I see something in them I recognize, something I never noticed before. When he touches me, none of it feels fake. I can’t help but be curious about him, and I can’t help but want to believe he’s changed.

I sigh and reach for my pocket. It isn’t until the taste of menthol hits my senses that I realize what I did. I stare down at the candy packet in disbelief as my body reacts to the memory of Zane pushing this same brand of mint into my mouth. My face heats, and desire rushes through my body, laced with a kind of longing I’ve never experienced before.

I’m hit with regret and a desire to rush to reassure him. Zane Windsor has always been my weakness, and now that we’re adults, that’s more true than ever. He’s the one I’ve always loved to hate, but has there always been an undercurrent of something more to it?

“*Celeste.*” I snap out of my thoughts to find Lily staring at me, her brows scrunched up in concern. She steps closer and gently brushes my hair out of my face, her expression searching. “This house is literally perfect for you. It looks like we walked right into your vision board, and you aren’t even excited.”

I place my hand on her arm and shake my head. “This house truly is perfect, isn’t it? I think it’s the one, you know?”

She grins and nods. “I think so too.”

I smile back at her, my stomach fluttering with excitement. She's right — not only does it tick all my boxes, I can genuinely see myself living here. "I think I'm going to buy it," I whisper, scared to even say the words. Moving in with my parents when I came home after college has been tough, and I'm more than eager to put an end to that. Just the thought of having true privacy excites me.

Lily nods and reaches for her bag, pulling out a champagne bottle. "I know. I suspected this was the one when you asked me to come view it with you again, but I knew for sure when I saw the nail polish you're wearing today. It's the one I bought for you last month, isn't it?"

I glance down at my gray-green nail polish in surprise. I must've subconsciously chosen it. "*Alpaca My Bags*," I mutter, grinning to myself. She bought it for me to use when I found my dream home and could finally pack my bags at my parents' house. "I'm buying it."

Lily pulls disposable champagne glasses from her bag and pops the cork, both of us jumping a little when it comes off, only to fall into a fit of laughter. She hands me a glass and holds her own up. "To new beginnings, and happy homes."

A happy home. I know how much those words mean to her — it's the one thing she lost and never regained. "To happy homes," I murmur. "You know this'll be your home too? You'll always be welcome here."

She nods and glances around the kitchen. "*You'll* always be home to me, Celeste. No matter where we are. You know that, right?"

I nod and notice the concern she's trying to hide. Lily hates it when I shut her out, but the more worried I am about something, the harder I find it to talk about it. She's gotten used to me not telling her things until I've processed them in my head and I'm fully ready to share, but she can always tell when something is up, and I know it hurts her when I don't confide in her.

What would she say if I tell her about Zane? Every time I try, my throat closes up. I've barely figured out how I feel about him myself, and even though I know she never would, I'm scared she'd judge me for it. He's bullied me for years, and part of me is ashamed that we've now... I'm not even sure what we're doing.

"Celeste?"

I blink in surprise and sigh when I realize that I'd been completely lost in thought again. "Sorry, Lil," I murmur, feeling defeated.

“What’s going on with you?” she asks, her voice soft. “You’ve been like this for weeks now, absentminded and quiet. I know that’s not uncommon for you, and you’ll eventually tell me whatever’s on your mind, but in the meantime, you’re worrying me. What’s wrong? Is it work? Or... are you... are you mad about me working for Windsor Hotels? Ever since I started there, we just... we barely talk.”

I look into my best friend’s eyes and take a deep breath, steeling myself. “Lily,” I whisper, my voice breaking. “I kissed Zane Windsor, and I haven’t been able to stop thinking about him ever since.”

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Chapter Eighteen

ZANE

I'm strangely nervous as I park in front of the unfamiliar house Celeste asked me to meet her at. When I realized she'd never truly give me a chance, I told myself I'd leave her in the past and tried my best to move on, yet here I am, simply because she called and asked me to come. If she ever realizes how much power she holds over me, I'm done for.

I sigh and reach for the stargazer lilies I brought for her. I planted them myself because I thought she'd like the smell of them, but I didn't think I'd get the opportunity to give them to her.

The front door swings open, and there she is, staring up at me with a hesitant smile on her beautiful face. That red dress and her matching red lips make me weak, but somehow, I manage to smile back at her. For weeks, I tried to forget all about her, tried to bury the hope I held on to in every way I could think of, only for my intentions to fade to dust at the sight of her. "Hey," I murmur, my voice soft.

"Hi," she replies, standing aside to let me in.

It's odd how so much seems to be standing between us now, when nothing has really changed. I suppose I'm a little disillusioned, reality finally drowning out the pink haze she wrapped me in. I'd so badly wanted to believe that we could start off with a fresh slate, that nothing would matter so long as she wanted me too. If only things were that simple.

“Brought you a gift,” I tell her as I hold up the stargazer lilies, my eyes roaming over the beautiful but very empty foyer. Surprise crosses her face, and she moves to take them from me, but I shake my head and pull them against my chest. “It’s a heavy bouquet. Just tell me where you want it.”

She nods and leads me into the house, her shoulders sinking as we walk in. “This is a terrible idea,” she says, her voice soft. “I don’t even have a seat to offer you. I just bought this house, and I moved in with nothing but my suitcase. All I’ve really got is a mattress, because even my bed isn’t here yet. I don’t know what I was thinking. I’m so sorry. Why don’t I grab my purse, and we can go somewhere instead?”

She’s rambling, the way she does when she’s nervous. It’s fucking adorable. “This is your home?” I ask, seeing the place through fresh eyes. She nods as we walk into the kitchen, and I can’t help but whistle. “Damn, Celeste. This is one hell of a house. This kitchen is even better than mine — and mine, well, it was custom made for me.”

She blushes as I look around, and something about her shyness just tugs on my heartstrings. I place the flowers on her white marble counter, my eyes roaming over her. “So I’m your first guest, huh?”

She tucks her hair behind her ear and nods, her cheeks still tinged pink. “Kind of. You’re my first guest since I’ve owned it. Not even my parents have been here yet — they’re dropping by tomorrow.”

I grin at her, intensely pleased for reasons I can’t quite identify. “In that case, you’ll have to show me around.”

She looks into my eyes, both of us well aware of everything that needs to be said, but neither of us willing to break the fragile peace between us. “I will, but first... I just wanted to say I’m sorry, Zane.” She wraps her arms around herself, her posture betraying her vulnerability. “When you saw me at the restaurant, it truly wasn’t what you thought it was, but I understand how me saying that it wasn’t a date wouldn’t be enough of an explanation — especially because I’d told you I’d be with my mother. I’ve gone over this in my head a million times, reminding myself that this is a bad idea, that I should take the excuse our argument offered me and distance myself from you, let this thing between us just fizzle out, but I... I can’t.”

I cross my arms and lean back against her counter, noting the way her eyes are drawn to my biceps. She bites down on her lip and drags her eyes back to mine, the air between us slowly becoming charged. I drink her in as

she explains how her mother set her up, but that only reinforces my doubts — not in her, but in *us*.

“Clifton Emerson,” I repeat, feeling oddly defeated. It only took me a few hours to find out who she’d been with, but hearing her say his name still hits me hard. “So that’s the man your mother envisions you with, huh? Notoriously calm and collected, patient, studious. He’s from a good family, but not one whose notoriety will bring you unwanted attention. Same industry too, but they’re not giants, so you’re on an even playing field. Yeah, you’d make for a great couple.”

I look away and run a hand through my hair, unsure of what else to say. I can’t compete with someone like him — my family is too well-known, the feud between the Harrisons and Windsors is too longstanding, and even if I suggested a merger, they’d just feel like we’re usurping them. Not that either her family or mine would ever consider it.

“Zane,” she says, my name a whisper on her lips. She takes a step toward me, and then another, until she’s standing between my legs.

“Why did you ask me to come over, Celeste?” I ask, unable to keep myself from reaching for her. I gently cup her face, and she sighs as she leans into me, her own hand finding its way to my chest. She places her palm over my heart, and it instantly beats faster for her. Always for her.

“Because each time I close my eyes, I think of the way you looked at me. I thought you’d been messing with me. That at most, you just wanted to sleep with me. I thought this was just something you wanted to get out of your system, that you couldn’t possibly be serious about everything you’d told me. Part of me was simply scared too, Zane — scared to trust you, to admit to my own feelings. To me, giving into this thing between us feels like losing. I was supposed to come back home and be this person who’s entirely unfazed by you, yet here I am, facing my demon and wanting more.”

My free hand wraps around her waist, and I hold on to her tightly. “This changes nothing, Celestial. If anything, it just proves you don’t trust me. Our past won’t let you, and I can’t compete with twenty years’ worth of bad memories. I’m not sure why I thought I could, but you and I... how could this possibly end in anything but disaster?”

“I don’t know,” she whispers, as her hand slides up from my chest until she’s got it wrapped around the back of my neck. “I don’t know, Zane, but I do know that I want you.”

Fuck. *Fuck.*

Celeste rises to her tiptoes and draws a shaky breath, her gaze roaming over my face like she's hoping for something she knows I can't deny her. "You were right, Zane. I want to find out what it's like to be with you, truly, fully. It's all I've been able to think about in the last couple of weeks. Maybe this is a terrible idea, maybe our argument was a sign, a warning from the universe... but it's one I'm going to ignore."

Having her so close is eating away at my resolve, and when she tilts her face, bringing her lips a touch closer to mine, I'm done for. "You'll be the death of me, Celeste Harrison," I whisper before tightening my grip on her and pulling her close, taking those pretty red lips and making them mine. She moans against my mouth and opens up for me, her hand threading through my hair as she steals away the candy I'd been sucking on. "Fuck, Celestial," I whisper as I turn us around and lift her on top of her kitchen counter. I don't think I'll ever get enough of her.

Her legs wrap around my waist and her hand roams over my body with the same urgency I'm feeling, and it's fucking exhilarating to be wanted by her. I inhale sharply when she slips her fingers underneath my t-shirt, my mind buzzing. She makes me feel fucking delirious.

Celeste pulls my t-shirt up, and I groan as I take it off, letting it fall to her kitchen floor as my hands find their way underneath her red dress. "I missed you," I whisper before recapturing her sexy little mouth, unable to keep the words buried. Not just in recent weeks, when we weren't speaking, but in the years she was away. I didn't realize it until she left, but she's always been my anchor.

Her hand moves to my jeans, and I pull my lips off hers, needing to look into her eyes. "We should slow down," I tell her, hating every word. I want her desperately, but I don't want to fuck things up with her. Not again.

"No," she says, her tone firm as she undoes my zipper. She lifts her gaze to look at me as she slips her fingers underneath the waistband of my boxer shorts, and I nearly fucking stop breathing. "I need you, Zane. *Please.* I want this. I want *you.*"

How the fuck am I supposed to say no to that? I can't. What my goddess wants, she gets. I look into her eyes as I push her silky panties aside, my cock fucking throbbing when I feel how turned on she is. "Is this all for me, my beautiful Celestial?"

She blushes scarlet and nods as she clumsily pushes my jeans down, taking my boxers with them. Her impatience is so fucking sexy, but the way she licks her lips when she lays her eyes on my cock undoes me.

“I need to see you,” I beg. She nods as she holds her arms up for me. Seconds later, her dress joins my clothes on the floor. Celeste looks into my eyes as she reaches behind her and undoes her red bra, and I’m fucking spellbound, desperate to commit every second to memory. She was beautiful when we were younger, but nothing could’ve prepared me for the woman in front of me today. She truly is a goddess, and fuck, I’m not worthy.

She grins as she repeats the process with her matching underwear, and there’s something so fucking ethereal about the way she holds my gaze — her red cheeks betray her shyness, but she doesn’t hide from me.

“Wow,” I whisper without thinking. “Fucking wow.” Never in my wildest dreams did I think I’d have Celeste Harrison naked on her kitchen counter, her pussy dripping for me. In what fucking world is that a reality I get to live?

I grab her thighs and lift one leg over my shoulder before turning my head in to kiss her thigh. She moans and buries a hand in my hair, gripping tightly. “Let me worship you,” I plead, desperate to show her I’m no longer the clumsy and inexperienced virgin she remembers.

“Zane,” she moans when I kiss her pussy, and I can’t help but smile. I haven’t even gotten a real taste yet, and she’s already trembling. Knowing she wants me the same, fuck, it’s such a rush.

I hold on to her thighs, and she leans back on her kitchen counter, watching me through lowered eyes as I drag my tongue around her clit. She’s as delicious as I remember her being — I thought I’d dreamed it up, but no, she’s still my favorite dessert.

“I can’t,” she moans. “I want to feel you inside me, Zane. I haven’t been able to think of anything but you for weeks now. I need you, please.”

“And I need you to come on my tongue first, my sweet goddess. Come for me, and I’ll let you have my cock.”

She lies back on the counter as I bury my face between her legs, and the way she moans for me has me on the fucking edge. I could come just from the sound of her — hardly the experience I want her to have.

I bring her close, teasing her clit over and over again, not quite flicking it with my tongue the way I know she wants me to — instead, I build her up

slowly, circling, lapping, until she's shaking and desperate for me. "You're doing so good, Celestial. *So good*," I whisper as I slip two fingers into her, pressing against her g-spot.

She moans my name as she comes for me, and fuck if it isn't the most surreal thing. None of my fantasies lived up to this — hell, not even my memories could. She's *everything*.

Celeste smiles shyly as she pushes herself back into a seated position and pulls me closer, her eyes searching, like she's wondering if this feels the same to me.

I doubt it does.

There's no way she could possibly feel everything I just did.

Her arms wrap around my neck, and I gently cup the back of her head, mesmerized as she grabs my cock and lines it up wordlessly. I look into her eyes, pushing the tip into her slowly, my breathing ragged.

It takes all of me to stop there, to pause and find the words I need. "Celeste," I murmur as I thread my hand through her hair and grip tightly, my other hand on her waist. "If I take you now, you're mine. Do you understand? No more messing around, no games."

She's breathing as hard as I am, her gaze filled with the same intensity, the same emotion. She nods, but that isn't enough for me.

"Tell me you understand."

"I'm yours, Zane. I think I always have been."

Fuck. I push into her another inch, and her eyes widen, a hint of discomfort in her expression despite how soaking wet she is. "I'm going to fuck you, Celestial, and then we're going to talk. We're going to figure out how to make this work, how to actually communicate with each other. We're going to find a way to face our past and future together."

She reaches for me and cups my face, the look in her eyes telling me all I need to know. "We'll make it work," she promises.

I push another inch into her, and her lips part, her muscles tensing around me like it's too much for her. "You're taking my cock so good, my goddess," I reassure her. "Your pussy was just made for me, wasn't it?"

She nods. "Made for you," she whispers, mindlessly echoing my words, and fuck me — she'll make me come if she keeps looking at me like that.

My hands wrap around her hips, and I hold her in place as I thrust all the way into her, earning myself the sexiest moan. "Oh God, *Zane*," she

whispers, her legs wrapping around me. My name on her lips is the most beautiful sound I've ever heard. I'll never get enough of it, of her.

"*Mine,*" I tell her as I pull halfway out, only to thrust back into her hard and fast, my control slipping in my need to have her.

Finally, *fucking finally*, she's mine.

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Chapter Nineteen

CELESTE

“That’s the third time you’re carrying me,” I murmur as I nuzzle Zane’s neck, already wanting more of him. I thought my memories deceived me, that I’d imagined the way he looked at me on prom night. Yet here he is, looking at me in that same way that makes my heart race.

“It’s the fourth time, actually,” he says, his voice so soft I’d have missed it if I weren’t so close to him.

I pull away a little to look at him, surprised. “Fourth?”

He nods and smiles. “Remember that time you fainted in chemistry class? I think we were about fifteen? I don’t think I’ve ever leaped over a desk that quickly. I caught you before you hit the ground and carried you to the nearest clinic.”

“What?” I don’t remember that at all. The only thing I recall is waking up with my parents hovering over my bed, worried sick. He never mentioned it, and neither did they.

“I fainted because I hadn’t eaten in over a day, but come to think of it, I never saw our chemistry teacher again. You didn’t have anything to do with that, did you?”

Zane tenses. “If I’m not mistaken, you asked him if you could take a few bites of your protein bar, and he told you no.”

That’s not an answer, and he knows it. “How long?” I ask, my voice breaking. I don’t even have to finish that sentence for him to understand

what I'm asking.

He looks away as he gently places me on top of my messy sheets, my bedroom bare except for the mattress he joins me on. Zane sighs as he lifts the duvet and covers both of us before turning to face me, his arm propped up on his elbow. There's something infinitely sexy about having Zane Windsor naked in my bed, the sheets low enough to expose his ripped torso. It's sexier still to look at him and know he's mine.

"I don't remember a time you weren't the center of my universe, Celeste. When we were kids, you were my rival, my nemesis — someone I'd been told I could never be friends with, couldn't trust. The warnings just intrigued me further, and the more I learned about you, the more interested I became. You were always one of the few people who could actually compete with me and win more than half of the time. Besides, you never cared about my surname. In fact, you despised me for it, but because of that, you saw the real me. You never cowered in fear around me, nor did you try to impress me. I lived in a world that had a preconceived idea of who I was supposed to be, except for when I was with you."

He sighs and brushes my curls out of my face. "I don't know when that interest turned into a rivalry as bad as ours was, or when that turned into more. All I know is that I don't remember a version of me without you. I realized I had feelings for you when we were sixteen, but by then, the dynamics of our relationship had been set in stone, and I'd given you too many reasons to hate me. I didn't know how to undo the damage I'd done, and each time I tried, it'd backfire and you misunderstood. When you left... god, I missed you so much, but at the same time, I hoped it'd result in a blank slate. I imagined us running into each other again and burying the hatchet. You'd look at me, and for once, there'd be no hatred in your eyes."

I reach for him, the tips of my fingers trailing over his temple and down to his jaw. His eyes fall closed, and he tilts his head, leaning into my touch. "What do you see when you look into my eyes now?" I whisper.

His lashes flutter, and my heart begins to race when his lips form a sexy smirk. "Something that gives me hope, Celestial."

He pulls me toward him, and I go willingly, surprised by how well we fit together, how safe I feel in his arms. Nothing has ever felt more right. "Zane," I whisper, my heart heavy. "We should... we should have that talk."

"I know," he replies, his hand burying in my hair. "Give me just a little more of you before we have a conversation that'll be tough for both of us."

I drag my nose up his throat, and he sighs happily when my lips brush against his. “Mine,” he whispers, before kissing me leisurely, re-igniting the flames in my body.

Zane moans as he rolls me onto my back and settles between my legs, his cock hardening rapidly. He looks at me like I truly am a goddess, and I can’t get enough of it.

My eyes widen when he lifts himself up on his forearms and pushes up against me, drawing an involuntary whimper from my throat as he teases me with the tip of his cock. The way it brushes against my clit when he moves his hips just a little has me desperate for more, and his smile tells me he knows it.

“Tell me we’ll make this work, against all the odds,” he implores.

I thread my hand through his hair and look into his eyes, unsure. “This is the most irrational thing I’ve ever done, Zane. Everything points to this ending in tears — our families would never accept it, we run competing companies and that’ll cause friction in our relationship, and then there’s our past. I’m worried a small part of me only wants you because it makes me feel powerful to see how much you desire me. It soothes the girl you tore down for years, and I’m not sure that’s enough. It isn’t a stable foundation, and I know I should walk away, but I just... I can’t, and I’m not sure why.”

He shifts his hips, and I bite down on my lip to suppress a moan. I have no doubt he’s doing this on purpose — he’s reminding me how perfect we could be, and he’s succeeding.

“Celestial, I’m grateful to have a chance with you at all, even if it is because it makes you feel empowered. No one needs to know, my sweet goddess. This thing... it can just be ours, if that’s what you want. I’ll be whatever you want me to be, Celestial, so long as you let me be yours.”

My heart skips a beat, and he smiles at me shyly, looking so vulnerable that all I want is to hug him tight and reassure him in whatever way I can. I never should’ve let our argument drive us apart, shouldn’t have taken so long to decide whether I could trust him. I gently trace the edge of his face with my fingertips, earning myself a soft sigh from him.

“It doesn’t matter how we got here, Celeste. All that matters is where we go from here. We have a history of not communicating and misunderstanding each other, and we can’t let our future be ruled by that too.” He leans in and presses a soft kiss to my forehead, his gaze pleading. “I already have our past working against me, so I have to work twice as

hard now to make up for that. Tell me you'll work with me by talking to me. Please, Celeste. I know us being together isn't going to be easy, but if we don't communicate with each other, we don't stand a chance at all. I can't go through this again with you, the insecurity and going weeks without talking to each other because we just don't know how to do anything but argue."

I've never seen him look so earnest. "I'm in my head a lot, and I have a habit of not discussing things until I've worked through them in my mind... but I'll try, Zane."

"Is that a vow?" he asks, his tone betraying his desperation. He truly wants this with me, doesn't he?

I gently cup his face, my heart pounding wildly. "I vow to communicate as best as I can, Zane, and I vow to look beyond our past and toward our future. My feelings for you scare me, to be honest. I shouldn't... I shouldn't feel so strongly about you when most of the memories we share aren't pleasant, but despite it all, I..."

He smiles at me when I can't quite find the words to describe how I feel. "Yeah," he whispers. "Me too." I exhale shakily when he drops his forehead to mine, our bodies pressed together. "We don't have to complicate things right away, Celestial. All those things we fear? They don't have to be a factor right now, not yet."

I nod in relief. "Let's figure out if we're good together before we tell our families. You know as well as I do that all hell will break loose if our grandparents find out. We already have so much stacked against us. While we figure out if we can withstand everything that being together entails, we should keep it quiet."

Zane smiles, and the way he looks at me makes my heart skip a beat. "Tell me, Celestial. Does this mean I get to call you my girlfriend now, even if it's only in private?"

I've never thought of Zane Windsor as *cute*, but that's exactly what he is in this moment. Still sexy and powerful, but perfectly adorable too. It strikes me then, that this is a part of him that's only *mine*.

"Only if I get to call you my boyfriend," I whisper, unable to keep the smile off my face. I don't want to let the past torment me any longer, not when I can have *this* instead.

Zane rolls his hips in response, desire flashing through his eyes. "Fuck. Say that again. Tell me what I am to you."

He's so hard, and the angle he positioned himself is the best kind of torture. It makes me want to push him until he loses control and takes me hard and fast. "Zane Windsor," I murmur. "My *boyfriend*. It sounds a bit juvenile, doesn't it?"

He pushes the tip of his cock against my clit and rocks back and forth in the most teasing way, grinning when I fail to suppress my moans. "It does sound juvenile," he whispers. "But if I have it my way, you'll be calling me something else entirely soon enough."

I frown in confusion, but he merely shakes his head and drops his lips to mine. "You took my first kiss and my first time, and now you're my first girlfriend. How many more firsts will you take? I'll give them all to you if you want them."

Before I can even reply, he slips the tip into me, making every one of my thoughts fade away, until all I can think about is the way he's making me feel.

Zane Windsor might end up becoming my downfall, but what a way to go.

Chapter Twenty

CELESTE

I grab my phone from my desk when I see Zane's name flash across the screen, unable to keep from smiling. The last couple of days have been completely surreal. We've been texting each other constantly, and every evening, he comes over to see me, even if it's only for a few minutes, with a new bunch of flowers in his hands each time.

Being Zane Windsor's girlfriend is an experience no one could ever have prepared me for. I know what it's like to receive his attention in a negative way, but having his undivided devotion is something else altogether. With each day that passes, more of my worries fade away. With each kiss, he heals some of the wounds he left me with.

IN- ZANE

Have dinner with me tonight? I'll cook you the same lamb ragout we had on our first date, and we can have it in the observatory this time. Some of the trees finally blossomed — you'll really like it.

I grin to myself as I type a reply.

CELESTE

I'll bring dessert!

IN-ZANE

Celestial, you ARE my dessert.

I bite my lip and clench my thighs, eager for tonight. Despite seeing each other every night, we haven't done more than kiss. We've both been too busy with work, and he's never able to stay long enough for things to truly escalate. I've been counting down the days until the weekend, and I think he has too. It's odd, because I truly love my job, but I'm glad it's Friday.

"Celeste?"

My hand shakes as I rush to lock my phone before my grandfather walks into my office, a mixture of shame and guilt making it impossible for me to face him.

He slaps an ornate card onto my desk, fury radiating off him. "Anne Windsor sent me an invitation to the grand opening of the Bellevue, that sly witch. She's mocking us. That hotel should have been ours."

I pick up the thick invitation card and frown as my grandfather begins yet another tirade about Anne Windsor and all her malevolence. I can't help but agree with him on this one — she's definitely taunting him. It even came with a handwritten note telling him to come check out the hotel he was unable to acquire.

"Why do you two hate each other so much?" I ask, frustrated. I've asked him this question countless times, and each time he gives me a partial truth — not enough to grasp the full picture, but enough to realize that the wounds are deep.

Grandpa stares out my window for a moment, his anger draining away. "I don't care what you have to resort to, Celeste. Find out what they're looking to acquire next, and by god, ensure it becomes ours." He picks up the invite and stares at it long and hard before ripping it up, letting the pieces flutter to my desk. "That grandson of hers is equally calculating, as you well know. Find a way to outsmart him for once. I'm sick of this."

I sigh when he turns and walks out, uncertain what to do or say. In the past, I'd immediately have started to research Zane's next moves, but now I just don't want to. All I want is to go to my boyfriend's house and forget about work.

So that's what I try to do.

Except, I'm still thinking about Grandpa's words when I pull up in front of Zane's house. I sigh as I reach for the bottle of Cabernet Sauvignon I brought with me, the shade of my nails a perfect match for the color of my favorite wine. It's almost as perfect as its name — *Cabernet With Bae*. I'm

kind of hoping Zane won't ask me about my nails tonight, because it might just be a little embarrassing to tell him what this shade is called. If he finds out I bought it for him, I'll never hear the end of it.

My eyes drop to the ground before I step out of the car, only for me to realize that the gravel I'd complained about is gone and replaced with smooth stones. He didn't do that for me, did he? My heart begins to race, and it instantly becomes impossible to stop smiling as I walk to the house.

The door opens before I reach it, and Zane appears, dressed in one of those suits that make him look irresistible. "Perfect timing," he says, reaching for me. I sigh as he leans in and kisses me, and just like that, today's worries melt away, even if it's just for a few moments.

"I missed you," I whisper without thinking.

Zane pulls away, his eyes widening. Sometimes he looks at me like he can't quite believe we really are together, and it always does something to me — drives me a little wild, makes me want to tease him. "I missed you more, Celestial."

He gently pushes my hair out of my face, seemingly hesitating. "What's wrong?" I ask.

Zane shakes his head and grabs my hand, his eyes on mine as he kisses the back of it before pulling me closer to the scanner connected to his door. "Let's put your fingerprint in so you can walk in whenever you want."

My lips part in surprise, and I lift my head to look at him. That's the equivalent of giving me a key to his house. "Isn't it too soon for something like that?"

He just chuckles and presses my thumb against the scanner, moving it back and forth until it's fully registered. "Don't underestimate how long I've already waited. It's bothering me that I can't have all of you, so at least within the confines of my home, I want things my way."

"Your way?" I ask, grinning as he pulls me into the house. "Tell me more about that — or better yet, show me."

He laughs as he entwines our fingers and pulls me toward the walkway that leads to his observatory. "Later, Celestial. Don't you worry, I have every intention of worshipping my goddess all night. You have no idea how long I've dreamed of having you in my bed, do you?" I blush, and he smirks as he tightens his grip on my hand, his eyes twinkling with a promise that makes my heart race. "But first, I'm going to feed both of us. I've had the longest day, and I'm starving."

He leads me to a fully decked table inside his rose garden, and for a few moments, all I can do is stare. “It’s like I stepped right into a fairytale,” I whisper, scared to disrupt the tranquility of this place. The roses are lit up with fairy lights, and there are candles all over the pathways, rendering an already beautiful place completely magical.

Zane wraps his arm around my shoulder and holds me tightly. “This rose garden used to be my mother’s. My dad planted these roses for her by hand, and I’ve taken care of them for the last couple of years. It might sound odd, but gardening was always something my mom and I shared. It wasn’t something any of my other siblings were interested in, so this place was always ours. When I’m here, it feels like she’s still with me. I know it’s silly, but maintaining her rose garden somehow makes me feel like I’m honoring her memory.”

He sighs and walks up to a rose bush before kneeling in front of it and grabbing scissors from a bucket nearby. In one swift move, he cuts off a stunning, huge crimson rose. “Someday, I’ll gift this entire observatory to my own wife,” he says, turning to me. Zane carefully pushes the stem through my hair, smiling to himself once it’s trapped within my curls, placing the rose just above my ear, framing the side of my face. “*Beautiful.*”

I’m hit with a sharp pang of jealousy at the thought of some woman wandering around here, her hand wrapped in Zane’s. Will he cut his mother’s precious roses for her, just to adorn her hair? Longing unlike anything I’ve ever felt before rushes through me, and every fiber of my being wants it to be *me*. The thought is so startling that I instantly push it aside.

“Tell me about your day,” I say instead.

Zane pulls my chair out for me, and much to my surprise, uniformed servers walk in with our food. Sometimes I forget just how wealthy and illustrious the Windsors are. My family does well, but the Windsors truly are on another level. They always have been.

“I’d like to develop a luxurious and grand city-center spa resort,” he tells me as he walks around the table to his own seat. “It’s an idea I’ve had for a while, but it’s not panning out.”

I stare at him wide-eyed, unease making my stomach churn. “You... you can’t tell me that, Zane.”

He frowns and leans in, propping his head up on his elbow. “And why is that?”

“I... just today, my grandfather told me to find out what your next target is and acquire it before you can. After you won the bid for the Bellevue, he’s been putting even more pressure on me to outdo you. He wants our company to outgrow yours in the next three to five years. You have no idea how much trouble I was in when I walked away from Chateau Chiara. My grandfather isn’t particularly happy with me right now, and I... well...”

“Oh,” he says, grinning. “My sister was able to convince my grandmother to buy some land for me, so rather than acquiring it, I’m going to build my own spa. Shall I give you the details so you can beat me to it?”

I blink at him in confusion. “What?”

He chuckles and reaches for my hand over the table. “I’ve always loved competing with you, Celestial, but I won’t do it if it’s hurting you. Whatever I’ve got, you can have. Every idea, every acquisition, everything. I have no intention of keeping secrets from my own girlfriend, nor will I tiptoe around you when we discuss how our days were. Don’t think I haven’t noticed how you change the subject each time work comes up. I won’t steal your ideas, Celeste, nor will I do anything that harms you or your grandfather’s company.” He lifts my hand to his lips and gently kisses the inside of my wrist. “That’s a vow.”

My heart races as I look into his eyes, spellbound. Could we really have this together? A normal relationship where we don’t keep secrets and freely discuss our days? I want it so desperately, and I pray I don’t come to regret placing my faith in him.

Chapter Twenty-One

CELESTE

I've just about finished pouring two glasses of wine when Lily walks into my kitchen, a wide smile on her face. "I'll never stop obsessing over this house," she says, sighing happily.

I grin when she side hugs me. "Missed you," I tell her. "We're supposed to be doing girls' night at least once a month, so how have two months gone by without us having a night to ourselves in my new house? Mom complained endlessly about all the Saturday cooking classes you skipped too. It isn't just me who misses you."

Her smile drops a little as she follows me into the living room. "I know. I'm sorry, Celeste. Work has just been so busy and I've only been there a few months, so I'm constantly working overtime. Windsor Hotels' training program is ruthless, and every day, at least one person gets fired. I'm scared I'm next."

I sink down on the brand new cream sofa that Zane helped me pick and pull her down with me. "I guess we knew it'd be like this," I murmur. "I'm not so crazy that I thought nothing would change, and we'd still see each other as much as we did at uni, but I don't know... most days I don't even speak to you at all anymore. Either you're working overtime, or I am. With us being at different firms..."

She sighs as she takes a sip of her wine. "I know. It's odd not even being able to talk to my best friend about work, but that NDA they made

me sign is just insanely ironclad. It *sucks*.”

I pull my legs underneath me and sigh. “Whatever, it’s fine. Just tell me if you’re happy there. Zane isn’t being too tough on you, is he? He told me you’re doing well at work, but I need to hear it from you.”

“I’d much rather have worked for Harrison Developments, but I’m happy at Windsor Hotels. It’s truly hard work, but it’s rewarding, and I’m honestly learning so much.” She glances at me then and raises a brow. “Wait. You said *Zane* told you I’m doing well at work?”

Heat rushes to my cheeks, and I bite down on my lip nervously. “Well, remember how I told you I kissed Zane, and then we had that huge argument, and you told me to just talk to him instead of letting the situation upset me?”

She nods slowly.

“Okay, so... well...”

“*Celeste*. What are you trying to say?”

“We’re dating,” I rush to tell her. “It’s been seven weeks and god, Lil, I don’t think I’ve ever been happier. It’s weird, right? I know it’s weird, because this is Zane and we’ve always hated each other, but he’s changed so much. Honestly, you wouldn’t believe me if I tell you how well he treats me. I really like the person he’s become, but I’m scared too, because what if it isn’t real? Or worse, what if I fall for him even further and my family finds out? I know it can’t last, but I’m just so...”

She places her hand on my arm and rubs gently, her brows scrunched up as she tries to decipher the words that just tumbled out of my mouth. “You’re doing that thing again,” she says, her voice soft.

“The word vomit thing? I’m just nervous. I kept wanting to tell you about him, but I wanted to do it in person, and we just couldn’t find any time to see each other.”

Lily searches my face, almost like she thinks I’m joking. “So, just to confirm, you’re dating *Zane Windsor*, the guy you’ve always hated, the one that bullied you for years and gave you the worst anxiety? That guy? You’re dating my boss?”

“I... yes. Yeah, that’s the one.”

She stares at me in shock and brings her glass of wine to her lips, knocking it back in one go. “Okay. Well, I didn’t see that coming,” she says, reaching for the bottle to top herself up. “When you said you kissed, I figured it was some pent-up hatred disguised as lust, something you just

needed to get out of your systems. I didn't think you'd start... *dating*. I don't get it. How did this even happen?"

I sink back against the cushions and sigh. "I don't know, Lil. He said he wanted a chance to show me who he's become in the last couple of years, and things just kind of moved really fast after that. I've seen him almost every day, and most evenings we just cook dinner together and talk. He helped me decorate the house, and we painted all the rooms together, except for the kitchen... that one we haven't gotten round to. It's all been very... normal. I wasn't sure about it either. I honestly thought it wouldn't take long for us to fall back into our old patterns and start arguing, but that just hasn't happened. It's odd, because hating him the way I did means I also knew him better than I even realized, and without that animosity between us, there's just so much we've got in common."

She lets her eyes fall closed for a moment. "Celeste," she says, her tone pleading. When she faces me, her gaze is filled with pain. "Please don't let him hurt you. I truly don't understand why you'd want to be with him after everything he's put you through. I admit he's changed, but that doesn't make him deserving of *you*. How is this even supposed to work? How could it possibly last?"

"I don't know. I just know that I'm happy — happier than I've been in years, because of him. Even if it doesn't last, I want every moment I can get. Is that crazy?"

Lily shakes her head and takes another big swig of her wine. "This can't be more than a temporary fling, Celeste. You know that, don't you? There's no space for him in the future you planned out so carefully. Archer was disowned for much less than this, and we both know it'd break your heart if your grandfather did the same thing to you. He will, if he finds out about this." Her eyes roam over my face, and the anguish in them hits me hard. "Please don't make me pick up the pieces after Zane breaks your spirit the way he used to. Please walk away while you still can. Make that choice before it's taken away from you by your families. You know as well as I do you can't marry him, so please don't fall for him."

I look down at my hands and inhale shakily. "I think it might be too late for that."

Chapter Twenty-Two

ZANE

“Don’t be late for dinner tonight,” my grandmother says over the phone, her tone as stern as always. “There are a few things I’d like to discuss with you in person — primarily how you’re going to handle Ed Harrison’s granddaughter. In the few months since she’s been working for her grandfather, she’s restructured several departments and vastly improved their company’s image and network. You need to put a stop to that. At the rate she’s moving, they’ll gain a competitive advantage over us in two years, if that.”

I suppress a proud smile as I park in front of Celeste’s house, eager to spend the afternoon with her. If my grandmother ever found out that I helped Celeste craft some of her plans, she’d probably kill me. “Don’t worry, Grams. I’ll handle Celeste.” *Just not quite in the way you expect me to.*

The last few months have been absolutely surreal, each barrier between us coming down after the other, until we were left with a kind of unity I’ve never experienced before. We spend almost every day together, and when I’m with her, time just flies by. Weeks turned into months, and more and more, I can see a future with her. It isn’t one without obstacles, but considering how strong our relationship has grown, I’m confident we’ll be victorious, no matter the odds. I just need to convince her of that too.

Grandma huffs before hanging up, leaving me even further intrigued about the feud between Ed Harrison and her. She doesn't get personally involved in my business as much as she used to, but each time Celeste makes a power move, Grams gives me an angry call. It's getting quite hard to pretend I have any intention of obstructing Celeste's path.

I grin to myself as I grab the bouquet of white camellias that I plucked from my observatory and make my way to the front door. It swings open before I even reach it, and Celeste jumps into my arms. I catch her and wrap my arms around her, involuntarily pressing the flowers against her back. "You're finally here," she says, her eyes twinkling. She's so fucking beautiful, and fuck, I can't believe she's mine. This is how I like her best — her hair a mess and the sexiest silky black shorts with a matching top barely covering her body. All for me. No one but me gets to have this unraveled version of her.

I grin as my lips find hers, the two of us rapidly losing ourselves in our kiss as I drop the flowers and carry her into the house, blindly making my way to the kitchen. It's become our evening routine — each night, I come over to cook for her and help her around the house, and she'll tempt me into staying the night. Six months flew by like that, and it's been even more perfect than I'd imagined.

"I thought you said we'd paint the last walls today," I whisper in between kisses as I place her on the counter, the distinct taste of menthol on my tongue. She's gotten so good at stealing my candies, but each time she does it, it still makes me so fucking hard. I don't even know why — I just find it sexy as fuck.

"Later," she says as she pushes my suit jacket off my shoulders, her fingers making quick work of my waistcoat and shirt — she gets quicker at it every day. She's been saying later for months now, and I can't help but chuckle. Each time we plan to paint her kitchen walls, we end up wrapped up in each other instead. We've managed all the other walls in the house, but something about the kitchen just always leads to me taking her on the counter.

Celeste sighs happily, and the way her gaze roams over my abs is absolutely maddening. There's something so special about being wanted by the one woman I've been obsessed with for most of my life. "I'm so angry that you were invited to be a speaker at the next conference we're attending,

and I was not,” she says, not even looking the least bit bothered. If anything, her beautiful amber eyes are sparkling with pride.

“I’d better make it up to you, huh?”

She nods eagerly, her hand running over my pants. “It won’t be easy. I’m very upset.”

I grin as I pull her clothes off, thrilled to find that she’s naked underneath her shorts. “You do look awfully sad,” I tell her as I cup her pussy. “So sad that you’re weeping for me, Celeste.”

She roughly pushes my boxer shorts down, leaving me standing naked. I smirk as I push two fingers into her, and she moans for me beautifully. “Spread those legs for me, goddess.” My girlfriend obeys, and fuck, what a sight it is. “Such a good girl,” I whisper. “Put those hands on the counter behind you, and don’t move them until I tell you to,” I order as I tease her g-spot. There’s something truly magical about the way she wants me, the way her pussy clamps down on my fingers.

“You’re so beautiful, sitting here like that on your kitchen counter, the sun shining down on you as you ride your boyfriend’s hand like the good girl you are. You’re a real-life goddess, did you know that?”

She moans, her hips rolling. “Zane,” she pleads, lifting her hands to reach for me.

I pull my fingers out of her and bring them to my lips, sucking them clean. “If you lift your hands off that counter, I’ll lift mine too, baby.”

“Please,” she says, her voice entirely too fucking cute. I bite down on my lip when she spreads her legs further and leans back, her gaze provocative. “I love your fingers, boyfriend dearest, but I want your cock. Fuck me, Zane.”

This fucking woman, she knows exactly what she’s doing to me. “What my goddess wants, she gets,” I murmur as I line my throbbing cock up for her.

The way she moans as I push into her fucking undoes me. “Zane,” she whispers as her arms wrap around me, our bodies intimately connected. She takes me so well, it’s insane how hot and tight she is. Celeste looks into my eyes and smiles. “I’m crazy about you.”

I swallow hard, struggling to believe this is all real. “Celeste,” I whisper. “Crazy doesn’t even begin to cover how I feel about you.” Surely she knows? I haven’t said the words yet, but I see them reflected in her eyes.

I pull back a little to thrust into her hard and fast, and she moans for me beautifully. Over the last couple of months, I learned which angles she likes best, and edging her has rapidly become my favorite hobby. There's nothing more surreal than Celeste desperate for an orgasm. She begs so prettily — I can't get enough of it.

She pulls me closer, her hand threading through my hair as she kisses me, her legs locked behind my back. I thought I was in love with her when we were kids, but fuck, that pales in comparison to the way I feel about her now.

"Yeah," she moans against my lips. "Like that, Zane, please. *Don't stop.*"

I nip at her lips, sucking her bottom lip between my teeth as I fuck her harder, my hand slipping between us to tease her clit. "How's that, baby?"

She nods and holds on to my shoulders as she moves with me, her pants coming faster and her moans becoming louder. "You're so fucking beautiful, Celestial. Fucking stunning, and all *mine.*"

"Yours." Her legs begin to tremble and her pussy clenches around me, making me come alongside her.

"Fuck, Celestial," I groan, my eyes falling closed. She makes me see stars every single time. It's fucking insane.

She giggles when I drop my forehead to her shoulder, my entire body sweaty and my heart racing. Celeste turns her head and kisses my temple softly, over and over again.

"We were supposed to paint those walls white," I murmur, tipping my head to the wall behind her. "Not these," I add, as I push my cock deeper into her.

She bursts out laughing and hugs me tighter. "You're ridiculous," she says as she drags her nose up my neck before kissing me just below my ear, sending a shiver down my spine.

"Made you laugh though."

She begins to reply, only for us both to freeze at the sound of her front door slamming. "Celeste!" a man calls, followed by a few more voices I don't recognize.

Her eyes widen and she pushes against my chest in a panic. "It's my parents!" she whisper-shouts as she slips off the kitchen counter, desperately scrambling for her shorts.

“Here,” I murmur, throwing her my shirt. She puts it on in a rush, trying her best to do the buttons up.

I’ve only just about got my boxer shorts on when the kitchen door opens, followed by three pairs of shocked eyes roaming over our disheveled states.

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Chapter Twenty-Three

ZANE

It's Celeste's brother I recognize first, in the moments before his fist connects with my jaw. I saw it coming and let him have it, but *fuck*, that man packs a punch.

"Don't!" Celeste shouts, trying her best to get between us. In one swift move, I pull her behind me and out of harm's way. He might be her brother, but I don't like the anger I see in his eyes. I don't want him anywhere near her until I'm certain he won't touch her.

Archer looks me in the eye, his anger making way for confusion once he realizes I have no intention of hitting him back or even defending myself at all. "What the fuck is going on here?"

"Indeed," Celeste's father says, his eyes running down my half-naked body. Thank fuck I managed to get my boxers on, at least. It's obvious what went down, but this situation would be so much more embarrassing if I'd had my cock out when they walked in. "*Zane Windsor?*"

"Mr. Harrison," I murmur, forcing a polite smile as I rub my jaw. That's going to bruise, no doubt. This is not how I wanted to be formally introduced to my future in-laws.

Celeste's mother stares at me and snickers before suppressing a smile. "I've been wondering why my sweet, attentive daughter suddenly seemed to be glued to her phone. It made no sense that she wanted to spend every

evening all alone in her house. I suspected there might be a boy, but I didn't think it'd be you, Zane."

Celeste places her palm against my back and moves just slightly so she can face her family, her head peeking out behind my arm. "I can explain and I *will*," she says, "but first I need you guys to give us some space."

Her father and brother look like they'll protest, but just as they open their mouths to object, Celeste's mother straightens her spine, her expression hardening. "*Out*," she snaps.

I tense, surprised, as both men share a look before instantly obeying her. Something about it makes my heart feel heavy — it makes me wonder if my own mother would've been like that if she'd still been here, gentle but imposing.

She follows them out, and Celeste turns toward me the second the door falls closed behind her. "I'm so sorry," she says, gently reaching for my jaw. "My parents were supposed to come over for dinner, but not for another few hours. I suppose they thought they'd surprise me since Archer seems to have flown in. I never should've told them where to find the spare key."

I wrap my hand around her waist and pull her closer. "It's okay, baby," I murmur. "But what are we going to do?"

Celeste rises to her tiptoes and presses the softest kiss to my cheek before pulling back to look at me, her gaze searching. "If it's okay with you, I'd like to take this opportunity to introduce you to my family. They aren't like my grandfather, Zane. I can't promise you they'd be okay with this, but that'd be because of the years I spent complaining about you. I don't... I don't think they care about our grandparents' longstanding rivalry."

I grin at her and gently brush her hair out of her face. "You'll introduce me as your boyfriend?" I ask, my heart pounding wildly.

She blushes and nods. "If that's okay?"

"It's more than okay, Celestial."

She smiles up at me. "Then we'd better get dressed. Somehow, I think they might like you a bit better when you're wearing clothes."

I chuckle and grab the collar of my shirt to pull her closer. "Then you'll have to take off my shirt first, Goddess."

Her arms wrap around my neck again, and she kisses me softly, slowly, almost like she's trying to reassure me. She's so fucking precious. "It'll be okay," she promises me, and my heart skips a beat.

Celeste keeps shooting me worried looks as we get dressed, and it's so fucking surreal to have her worry about me like that. This isn't what I expected — I thought she'd be ashamed of me, but that isn't the case at all.

"Come on," she says, her hand wrapping around mine.

She leads me into the living room, where her brother and father are seated on some boxes filled with my stuff, all random little things that Celeste liked in my house and that I've brought over for her in the last couple of weeks. It's almost like they were put in a time-out, sitting in the corner instead of next to Celeste's mother on the sofa. Both men tense when we walk in, their eyes dropping to our joined hands.

Celeste tightens her grip on me and straightens her spine, just like her mother did earlier. "Archer, before I say anything further, you'll apologize to my boyfriend for hitting him for no reason. You're the one who barged in on us uninvited and unannounced. He did absolutely nothing wrong and didn't deserve to be treated with such brutality."

I stare at her in awe, my chest expanding with pride. She's standing up for me? I don't think anyone other than my siblings has ever done that for me.

"Your *what*?" Archer says, jumping to his feet.

"*Sit down*," their mom snaps, and I watch in fascination as he slowly sinks back down onto the box he's claimed as his chair. Is that the power of a mother? My grandmother is powerful in her own right, but it isn't quite the same.

Celeste's mother crosses her arms and raises one brow as she stares her son down. "Your sister is right. This is her home, and we barged in without notice. Not only did we invade her privacy, but you also assaulted her... *guest*. Apologize."

Archer looks at his mother, his face filled with betrayal, and it's surreal. He's well on his way to becoming a multi-millionaire, having co-founded a Fintech firm that tripled in value in just the last three months. Yet you'd never guess that looking at him now, faced with his mother. It's odd how strangely jealous I find myself. I'd give the world to have my mom chastise me over something, to witness how much she cares. "You can't be serious, Mom."

She just stares at him until he grits his teeth and turns toward me. "I apologize for punching you," he says, but he looks like he'd like to add something to that sentence. Likely the words *only once*.

I merely nod at him. I have no desire to fuck with him, not now, and not ever. If I play my cards right, he'll end up becoming my brother-in-law, after all.

Celeste's father rises to his feet and extends his arm toward the garden. "Why don't we have a chat outside," he says, throwing his wife a reassuring look. She sighs and nods, but Celeste tenses.

"No," she rushes to say. "You're not taking him anywhere."

I bite back a smile and turn to look into her eyes. I gently brush her hair out of her face and shake my head. "I'll be right back, okay?" She parts her lips, her expression conveying her worries, but I simply cup her cheek, the two of us communicating wordlessly until she nods in resignation. I'm so tempted to kiss her forehead, but I just know that'd earn me another punch from either of the men behind me, so I smile at my girlfriend before turning to follow her brother and father into the garden.

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Chapter Twenty-Four

CELESTE

“Are you sure you’re okay?” I ask over the phone as I cross the road to my favorite coffee shop, my gaze drifting to the two women who seem to be following me, both dressed in sunglasses and baseball caps that don’t match their expensive outfits and high heels.

Zane sighs. “Celestial, how many times do you need me to tell you? Archer, your father, and I just had a chat, and everything is fine. Just focus on prepping for next week’s conference, alright? I have to make a good impression on your grandfather, especially now that your parents know about us.”

I sigh as I queue up, only to glance behind me and notice both women hover by the glass door, clearly debating whether to enter. “I’m worried because you won’t tell me what they said to you. It’s weird how the three of you walked back in acting like nothing happened. Even my mom thought it was weird.”

He chuckles, and the sound makes my stomach flutter. “Don’t worry, baby. I promise it’s all good. If there truly was something to worry about, I’d tell you, okay?”

“Hmm, sure,” I murmur as I place my coffee order. “Speaking of something we may need to worry about. I think I’m being followed.”

“That’s impossible,” Zane says, followed by the sound of typing. “I have two bodyguards on you that provide round-the-clock protection.”

“I’m sorry, what?”

Zane clears his throat awkwardly. “They, um, they protect you, but they don’t report to me about what you do,” he tells me, and I sigh, not even as surprised as I probably should be.

“Don’t you think that’s something you should’ve mentioned at some point?”

“Yeah, and you can be mad about that later, but you’re right to say there’s something for us to worry about. According to the Windsor security team, you *are* being followed.” He groans, piquing my curiosity. “Celeste, it’s my sister and her best friend. Fuck.”

I suppress a laugh and lift my coffee cup to my lips, my gaze dropping to my sheer nude nails, another shade I bought for Zane. He couldn’t stop grinning when I told him it was called *BBF Best Boyfriend*. “Interesting. Is this payback for what Archer did?”

Zane chuckles. “Absolutely not. My sister is just fucking psychotic. Give me five minutes, and I’ll have our security team intercept her so you can get back to the office uninterrupted.”

“No,” I tell him, oddly curious about Sierra Windsor. She’s a couple of years younger than us, so I never had an opportunity to get to know her, but from everything I’ve heard, she’s incredibly smart, if not a little intense. Out of all the Windsor siblings, she appears to be the most eccentric. I can hardly blame her — her five older brothers must be so overbearing. “I’ll handle this.”

“Celestial, that’s not a good idea,” he begins to say, but I merely grin as I walk back to the exit.

“Gotta go. Love you, bye!” I say before ending the call and walking out. Sierra pulls her cap further down her face, like that could possibly hide her long dark glossy hair and that aura all the Windsors have. Even as she tries to shrink herself to evade my attention, she’s dripping power. So does the woman standing next to her. I raise a brow when I realize it’s the model I saw Zane with a few months ago — the one I’d been so insanely jealous of, only to find out that he wasn’t lying. From everything I’ve heard about her throughout the last few months, she truly is like a sister to him.

“So,” I say, glancing between the two women. “Sierra Windsor and Raven Du Pont, right?”

They both tense, and Sierra sighs before pulling her cap off. Her sunglasses follow, and I smile when I notice her eyes are a perfect replica of

Zane's. There's something odd about the way that instantly endears her to me.

"Sorry about that," Raven says, following her best friend's lead and pulling off her cap. "I tried to discourage her, but it's really hard to make her change her mind once she's decided on something."

Sierra crosses her arms and stares me down, her gaze unexpectedly intimidating for a girl who's barely even in college. She's what? Nineteen? "So you're the reason my brother has a large bruise across his jaw," she says through gritted teeth. "I'll give you exactly three minutes to explain before I give you a matching bruise."

I try my hardest to suppress a smile, but she clearly notices the way the edges of my lips twitch, because her expression turns stormy. She's surprisingly adorable. Zane mentions her every once in a while, and I wondered why he adored her so much. I can see why now.

"My brother and parents caught Zane and me having sex in my kitchen."

Raven slaps a hand over her mouth in an attempt to stifle her startled laughter, and Sierra looks positively horrified. "Oh," she says, her eyes widening. "Oh."

I shrug, unsure what else to say. "Honestly, Zane barely got his boxers on in time before my brother walked in. I'm pretty sure you can imagine what happened next."

Raven begins to laugh in earnest now and hooks her arm through mine. "You're going to buy me a drink since I can't buy one myself, and then you're going to tell me all about this," she says, pulling me along. "I'm going to tease Zane about this *forever*, but I'll need all the details first."

Sierra trails behind us, her expression unreadable now. She's quiet all the way to the rooftop bar Raven insists on going to, despite it barely being noon. It's clear Sierra's mind is whirling — Zane gets like that sometimes, when he's thinking about a new project.

Raven places our order seconds after we're seated, taking the liberty to choose our cocktails for us. All the while, Sierra just studies me, and I let her. If she's anything like her brother, she's thinking about the words she'll choose.

"How long has this been going on?" she asks, eventually. "And what exactly *is* going on?"

I smile at her, uncertain what to say. “Shouldn’t you be asking your brother that?”

“I did. He just smiled and ignored my question.”

“Then it’s probably none of your business.”

She leans in, a wicked grin on her face. “Is that so? Perhaps I should just ask my grandmother then. I’m sure she could find out in a matter of minutes.”

My eyes widen a fraction, and I can’t help but admire her guts. She’s threatening me. That’s... oddly cute. I place my elbow on the table and rest my chin on my fist as I study her. She tries to hide it, but this isn’t mere curiosity. She’s genuinely worried about her brother.

“I’m madly in love with Zane, and we’ve been in a formal relationship for a little over seven months.”

Raven knocks her shoulder into Sierra’s and shoots her a look. “I told you it was serious. Zane asked me to design a pair of shoes for a girl last year. She’s wearing them right now.”

“Celeste,” Sierra says, her expression pained. “What are you both thinking? You’re a Harrison.”

“I know,” I murmur, my expression falling. “I know.”

Sierra grabs her cocktail and knocks it back before reaching for mine and immediately emptying my glass too. “Well, you’re going to have to win my grandmother over, and you’ll need our help.”

I smile at her conspiratorially. “I was hoping you’d say that.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

ZANE

I'm not even sure how long I've been hovering by the reception desk when Celeste and her grandfather finally walk in. I'm determined to leave a good impression on him this weekend, but I'm not entirely certain how to pull that off when I spent years getting on his nerves.

Normally, the fact that this conference is being hosted in a Windsor hotel would've worked in my favor, but not today. I straighten my tie nervously and take a deep breath before walking in their direction.

Celeste's eyes meet mine from across the lobby, and the edges of her lips tip up into a secretive smile — one that's all for me. It's the encouragement I needed.

We've spoken about this, how we'd both try to leave good impressions on each other's grandparents in an attempt to warm them up to the idea of us. In practice, though, it's fucking nerve-racking.

I'm only a few steps away when a familiar man steps in front of them, a wide smile on his face. "Celeste, Ed!"

I watch as Ed Harrison's normally stoic expression turns friendly. "Clifton Emerson," he says, smiling jovially. I grit my teeth as the two men embrace, and Celeste shoots me a look I can't quite decipher. Is it concern? Frustration? There's something more to it, and it doesn't sit well with me.

My entire body tenses when Clifton fucking Emerson wraps his arms around my girlfriend and pulls her into a tight hug. Thankfully, Celeste

keeps it brief and steps back quickly, her demeanor professional. I haven't forgotten how her mother set the two of them up, and Clifton clearly hasn't either, judging by the way his eyes roam over my goddess's body.

"Welcome," I snap. "To The Grand Windsor Hotel, one of our oldest and most prestigious establishments."

Why the fuck did I just say that? I sound like some kind of fucking tour guide, or worse, like I'm *bragging*. Clifton just stares at me while Ed sighs, annoyance rolling off him in waves.

"Zane Windsor, right?" Clifton says, extending his hand. "You're a hard man to get hold of. I meant to introduce myself at your gala but didn't get a chance. I'm Clifton Emerson."

I shake his hand far harder than I need to and watch him flinch. That asshole. He's still standing too close to my girl, and it's fucking killing me that I can't grab her hand.

She shoots me a look that tells me to play nice, and I sigh as I turn to her grandfather. "I took the liberty of upgrading your rooms as a gesture of goodwill. Our families have not been on good terms in recent years, but I'd like for us to turn over a new leaf."

He glances at the keycard in my hand and takes it reluctantly. "A new leaf, huh? Over my dead body."

My eyes widen in surprise as he stalks past me, and Celeste looks equally bewildered. I clear my throat awkwardly as I hand her the keycard I had made for her. "This is yours," I tell her, my fingers lingering over hers when she takes it from me.

"I'm sorry about that," she murmurs. "He isn't really a soft-spoken kind of guy, but this was unexpected, even for him." She glances at Clifton then, who stayed glued to her side, like I'm the one who can't be trusted around her. Fucking dick. "I appreciate this, Zane," she says, her gaze conveying her true meaning — she appreciates me making an effort, even if it appears to have been in vain.

"Let me walk you up," I offer. "You're on the top floor."

Clifton grins and places his hand on Celeste's back. "Oh, that's wonderful! Me too! I'll go up with you too."

Her eyes shoot to mine, and I sigh as I force myself to stay calm. I'm supposed to improve my image this weekend, and I can't do that if I rip his fucking arm off his fucking body. Thankfully, Celeste swiftly steps away,

putting me between the two of them as she walks ahead. I fall into step with her and smirk, my anger appeased. “Such a good girl,” I whisper.

Her cheeks redden a touch, and I’m tempted to kiss her right here in this lobby that’s buzzing with every single industry professional we know. I’ve never felt this insane need to mark someone as mine.

She positions herself in the corner of the elevator, and I plant myself right next to her to keep Clifton away, but the fucker just stands in front, facing her instead of the elevator doors. “We should have dinner together tonight,” he tells her, fucking *beaming*. “I had such a great time at brunch last time. I followed some of your advice, and it worked wonders.”

I clench my jaw and try my hardest to suppress the memory of the two of them, and the argument Celeste and I had as a result.

“Unfortunately, I can’t tonight,” Celeste says, her hand brushing against mine. “My weekend is pretty packed. I really like to get the most out of conference sessions, so I usually like ordering room service and going over my notes in the evenings.” Her pinky hooks around mine, and I smile to myself, my body relaxing.

“You really are such a good girl, aren’t you?” I murmur.

She looks into my eyes, her gaze heated. “There’s nothing wrong with that, you know!” she replies, trying her hardest to sound peeved.

I chuckle, amused by her little charade. “Didn’t say there was, Celeste. I was just thinking that perhaps you could teach me a thing or two.”

Clifton’s expression hardens. “Agreed,” he says as the elevator doors open. “Room service while we discuss the sessions sounds wonderful. Great way to network, too.”

He’s fucking relentless, and I can’t even blame him. I’d probably behave the same way if I were in his shoes — but I’m not, and he’s not stepping into mine, no matter how hard he tries.

“I’m that way,” he says, pointing to the left with a sour look on his face. He glances at me, seemingly trying to decide whether he should walk Celeste all the way to her room or not, and I just about keep from rolling my eyes.

“We’re that way,” I tell Celeste, leading the way. She nods and follows me in the opposite direction of Clifton, not even sparing him another glance.

“I’m sorry,” she says the moment we’re out of earshot. “I’m not sure why he’s being that way. I haven’t spoken to him since that brunch. I don’t

even have his number.”

“You’re not at fault, but I’m still fucking jealous,” I admit.

Her eyes widen. “You’re... *jealous*? Of *him*?”

I chuckle at her incredulous expression. Celeste stops in front of her room, and I lean against the wall beside the door, my eyes on hers. “I am, Celestial. Make me feel better. Tell me you’re mine.”

“How about I invite you in and *show* you I’m yours?” she asks, her gaze drifting around the hallway.

I grin at her as I follow her into the presidential suite. “I was hoping you’d say that, because this room... it isn’t just yours. It’s ours.”

She turns to face me, her lips parted in shock. “You didn’t.”

I shrug as the door falls closed behind me. “Of course I did. There’s no way you were going to stay in a hotel I own without sharing a room with me.”

“Zane,” she chastises, her hand on my chest. “We’ll get caught.”

I lower my head to hers and drink her in. “We won’t. The rooms on this side of the floor are all empty, and I put your grandfather on a different floor. His key won’t even let him up here.” She rises to her tiptoes, a wicked grin transforming her face. She’s fucking perfect. “Besides, I figured your grandfather would’ve ordered you to snoop around. This way, you can do that in peace. I’ll even help you get intimately acquainted with every flat surface in this room, you know, for research purposes.”

She chuckles as her lips brush against mine. “Why don’t you start by pushing me up against the wall so I can see how sturdy it is? You know, for research purposes.”

I capture her bottom lip between my teeth, and her hands find their way into my hair as I do as I’m told. After all, what my goddess wants, she gets.

Chapter Twenty-Six

ZANE

I try my hardest not to glare at my phone as I text my girlfriend. It's ridiculous — she's sitting right next to me. Unfortunately, Clifton is sitting on her other side, whispering into her ear every chance he gets. I catch snippets of it every once in a while, and it's all useless commentary on the talks we're attending. Nothing I can fault him for, but annoying nonetheless.

ZANE

Is it wrong that I'm thinking about the way you rode my face last night while your grandfather gives a presentation about the changes he's experienced in the industry during his tenure?

I begin to tap my foot when she discreetly checks her phone and smiles, her cheeks turning rosy.

CELESTIAL

I'm not sure... if it is, then it's probably also wrong of me to imagine the way you'll look at me when I drop to my knees and suck your cock tonight.

I clear my throat awkwardly as heat rushes through me. One text message, and she's got me hard. I grab my peppermint tin from my suit pocket, needing something to distract me. I'm so fucking tempted to either

punch Clifton Emerson in the face or throw my girlfriend over my shoulder and carry her back to our room. Ideally, I'd do both, but instead of that, I sit back and pop a mint into my mouth as I stare at the stage in front of us.

Clifton leans forward and smiles at me politely. "Would you at all be willing to part with one of those?" he asks, eyeing my candy.

Goddamnit. Not only does he want my girl, he wants my candy too? Fuck. I sigh as I hand him the tin and watch him start crunching one before offering one of *my* candies to *my* girlfriend. She shakes her head and throws me an amused look, like she knows what I'm thinking.

That little shit leans into her again, and the woman next to me straightens her spine before placing her hand on my thigh. "*Excuse me.* Could you please be quiet," she whisper-shouts at Clifton, before looking at me. "I can't believe them. They've been talking the entire time. Enough is enough." Her gaze roams over my face, the appreciation in her eyes obvious. "I'm Cora, by the way."

I know that look. I've seen it a thousand times before. This random girl is trying to flirt with me. Before I can even put her in her place, Celeste reaches over and wraps her hand around Cora's wrist. "*Excuse me,*" she says. "Could you please refrain from sexually harassing other attendees?"

I bark out a laugh as she shoves Cora's hand off my leg and straightens in her seat, her body tense with anger.

"I... I..." Cora stammers, her startled eyes meeting mine.

"*Quiet,*" I tell her, oddly pleased with my girlfriend's behavior.

I shift in my seat so my hand brushes against Celeste's, and I slowly hook my pinky over hers, just like she did to me in the elevator yesterday. Her shoulders relax a little, and I grin as I stare ahead, suddenly not at all bothered by Clifton's running commentary. I never thought I'd find jealousy hot, but fuck, it looks great on my goddess.

Celeste pulls her hand away from mine to applaud her grandfather at the end of his presentation, and I sigh as I follow her lead, glad his talk is finally over. I'm eager to get on his good side, but man, that presentation was boring.

"We've got a few minutes until the next session starts, right?" Celeste asks as she rises to her feet.

Clifton nods, clearly assuming the question was directed at him. Fucking idiot.

“Bathroom break?” I ask. “Excellent idea. I think the next session is two hours long. Best to go now,” I say, chatting pure shit as I get up too. “Watch our stuff, Emerson,” I add, before that fucker gets any ideas about following us out.

Celeste tries her hardest not to smile as we exit the ballroom. She only makes it a few steps into the hallway before I grab her and push my all-access key against the door of the closest utility room. She giggles when I pull her into the room and against the door.

“Zane,” she breathes, her arms wrapping around my neck. “We can’t — we’ll seriously get caught.”

I grin as she rises to her tiptoes to meet my lips halfway, her body’s response in conflict with her words. “Then you’d better be quiet, Celestial.”

I kiss her roughly, urgently, and she moans when I lift her up against the door, her pencil skirt riding up as her legs wrap around me. “You knew, didn’t you?” I whisper against her mouth as I push aside her underwear. “That I’d punish you for every word you let him whisper into your ear.”

“Yes,” she admits, her gaze provocative, heavy with desire. I’m not at all surprised when my fingers slip into her easily. Celeste bites down on her lip to suppress a moan and reaches for my belt, undoing it in a rush.

“Fuck,” I groan, my forehead dropping to hers when she wraps her hand around my cock and squeezes tightly.

She looks into my eyes as she lines me up, and I clench my jaw, holding on to her hips tightly before thrusting into her, taking her hard and deep. “Fucking unreal,” I whisper. “You feel so fucking good, baby.”

Her hands wrap into my hair, and she grips tightly, her touch betraying her desperation. It’s crazy how fucking perfect she is. “Look,” I murmur, pulling back a little to glance down between us. “Look how well you’re taking my cock, Celeste.”

She watches as I pull out almost all the way and then push back into her slowly, making my cock disappear into her inch by delicious fucking inch. “More,” she whispers, her gaze pleading.

I grin as I place my forearm underneath her to hold her up, freeing up my hand to push my thumb against her clit. “You want this?” I ask, rubbing circles around it as I continue to fuck her slowly, not giving her what she wants. “This cock is only for good girls, Celestial. Are you going to be good for the rest of the day, or are you going to keep making me jealous?”

“I’ll be good,” she whimpers. “I’ll be your good girl, Zane. I won’t... won’t let him...”

I swipe my thumb over her clit, my touch light, teasing. “Who do you belong to?”

“You,” she instantly replies, and I reward her with another brush of my thumb, slowly bringing her closer. “I’m yours,” she tells me, her eyes filled with the same emotions I’m feeling. “Only yours.”

Fuck. I lean in and take those pretty lips of hers, and she kisses me hard, her tongue tangling with mine until she’s stolen away what’s left of my peppermint candy. I fucking love it when she does that, and she knows it.

“You’re so fucking sexy,” I whisper as I finally give her what she wants, my hips moving faster, harder. “I can’t get enough of you, you know that?”

She moans my name as she unravels for me. There’s nothing more beautiful than watching the way her eyes widen a little, the way she can’t seem to suppress her moans when I take her right to the edge — and then, like fucking magic, her pussy clenches around me. “Yes,” she moans, “oh god, yes.”

I drop my forehead to hers as she milks me for all I’m worth, my own moans swiftly becoming uncontrollable as I fill her up deep inside. Her lips find mine, and she kisses me as we both come down from our high.

“Ethereal,” I whisper. “That’s what you are, Celeste.”

She exhales shakily, her gaze filled with something I don’t dare to name for fear I’m wrong. Instead, I grin as I pull out of her and place my fingers against her dripping pussy, looking her in the eye as I push my cum back into her. “I hope you enjoy sitting back down next to him, your pussy filled to the brim,” I murmur as I gently put her back down, her feet unsteady. “I’ll enjoy watching you squirm in your seat.”

She throws me a chastising look as she straightens out her clothes before reaching for my trousers and doing them back up for me. “I’ll definitely enjoy it,” she tells me, her gaze turning provocative. “Because the entire time I’m going to imagine what you’ll do to me tonight. Each time you glance over, just know that I’m imagining the way you’ll fuck my face tonight, Zane.”

This fucking woman. She grins and walks out of the utility closet, leaving me staring at the door for a few moments, before I snap out of it and follow her back to our seats.

“Just in time,” Clifton says. “The next session is starting in two minutes.” His eyes roam over her face, almost like he’s searching for something, like he can tell something is different about her.

I smile as I squeeze past them and sit down next to Celeste, the seat on my left now blissfully empty.

“Oh, good. Perfect timing,” Celeste replies, before crunching down on my peppermint candy, the sound loud. Clifton raises a brow, and something flickers in his gaze — something that looks a lot like defeat.

His eyes move to the candy tin he’s still holding, and I grin as I swipe my thumb over my lip before pulling it back to look at the traces of light pink lipstick on my finger. His shoulders sink, and I lean back in my seat, unable to wipe the smirk off my face.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

CELESTE

I can't stop trembling as I stare up at one of Zane's newest hotels. "This is a bad idea," I tell Sierra, who doesn't seem so sure about her plans anymore either.

Raven wraps her arm around me, her body just as tense as mine. "It's going to be okay," she says, but she doesn't sound very convincing at all.

"I promise my grandmother is really nice," Sierra tries to reassure me as we walk in and follow the signs for the Windsor soup kitchen, an initiative that Anne Windsor started years ago.

"She's nice to *you*," I mutter, discouraged.

"No, it's true," Raven jumps in. "She's really nice, but she just needs a chance to get to know you in a bit more of an informal way. This'll be perfect."

I nod, unable to suppress my nerves. The plan is to simply accompany Raven and Sierra whenever they volunteer for one of Anne Windsor's charities until she slowly warms up to me. Other than saying hi, I'm not actually planning to say much to her at all. It's our hope that seeing me a few times will allow her to let go of some of the prejudices she might have because of my surname. That way, she might be receptive to it when Zane and I eventually tell her about us.

"Here you go," Raven says, handing me a hairnet, apron, and gloves.

Sierra helps me put on the apron before gently rubbing my arm. “It’s going to be okay. If nothing else, we’ll have a fulfilling afternoon, okay?”

I take a deep breath and nod at her, grateful for her support. I wasn’t sure what to make of her when we first spoke, but over the last couple of weeks, I’ve grown fond of her. Just like Zane, she cares deeply about everyone around her, and I’m lucky enough to now have that same caring attitude directed at me too.

“Sierra! Raven!”

I flinch at the sound of Anne Windsor’s imposing voice, and Raven’s hand slips into mine as she pulls me along. “Grandma Anne,” she shouts.

Grandma. Is it odd to be a little jealous of Raven? I know she’s due to marry Ares in a couple of years, but they’re not formally engaged yet. Sierra explained that the way her family treats Raven has a lot more to do with the two of them being best friends, but I can’t help but long for this too — this level of acceptance and inclusion. I wish I didn’t have to fight for it so hard. Just the thought that being with me might feel like a battle to Zane *hurts*.

I watch as the three women embrace, and for a moment, Anne Windsor looks like any doting grandmother, albeit an obviously rich and classy one in her pantsuit. “Who is this? You actually made a friend?” she asks her granddaughter, one brow raised. “Or did you pay her to make it look like you have more friends than just Raven?”

I bite back my laughter, which is made increasingly difficult by the obvious outrage on Sierra’s face. Raven, on the other hand, doesn’t hold back at all. She erupts in a fit of giggles and leans into Grandma. “Grams,” she says, “what makes you think she *isn’t* paying *me*?”

Sierra reaches for me and entwines our fingers. “Celeste,” she says, pouting. “I’m being bullied.”

I grin, opening my arms for her, and she hugs me tightly, resting her head on my shoulder. “Just so you know, this hug costs extra,” I whisper-shout, loud enough for everyone to hear.

Everyone but Sierra bursts out laughing, and she pulls away, her lips parted in shock. “Wow,” she murmurs, her eyes twinkling in amusement. “*The betrayal.*”

“Celeste, is it? You look familiar. Your name sounds familiar too.”

I look up at my boyfriend’s grandmother, my heart racing as I nod politely. “It’s good to meet you,” I tell her as I awkwardly offer her my

hand. We technically have met before, but I was a child then, and I doubt she remembers it. Every time we've been in the same room since, she's gone out of her way to avoid Grandpa and me. She's always cordial and never fails to invite everyone in the industry, but she's always made it clear that it's nothing but a professional courtesy when it comes to my family.

She smiles at me warmly, and I exhale shakily as she takes my hand. "*Celeste*," she repeats, her expression hardening as she pulls her hand back. "*Celeste Harrison*, is it not?"

I blink in surprise and nod, unable to lie to her. I'd hoped it'd take her longer to realize what my surname is — long enough for me to make a good impression.

Her eyes flash with anger, and she crosses her arms. "What are your intentions in approaching my granddaughter?"

I take a step back and shake my head, my heart sinking. "I... I... I don't —"

Sierra wraps her arm around my shoulder, and Raven moves to my other side in a show of solidarity. "Please stop it, Grandma," Sierra says, her voice pained. "She's my friend. Whatever feud you have with her grandfather doesn't have to extend to our generation. Celeste is lovely, and if you'd just take a moment to get to know her, you'd see that."

"I'd like you to leave. I don't want to see you on Windsor property without a formal invite ever again. Stay away from my granddaughter. I don't care how nice you might be, Celeste. I don't want a Harrison anywhere near me and mine. I won't risk you deceiving and hurting my loved ones like your grandfather did."

I begin to tremble, unsure how to respond. "I'm not like him," I tell her, my tone desperate. "I just —"

"— get out," she cuts me off as she wipes her hand on her apron, as though my touch infected her. "You can either leave voluntarily, or I can have you removed."

I take a step back, trying my hardest to blink away my tears. How could things have gone this wrong? "Come on," Sierra says, her voice breaking. "Let me... let me walk you out."

She's trembling as hard as I am while we make our way through the hotel. "I'm so sorry," she says, choking back a sob.

I turn toward her and grab her shoulders gently, trying my hardest to smile at her. "It's not your fault, Sierra. We knew this would be hard."

She sniffs, a single tear running down her face. "I just... I didn't... I thought..."

"I know," I murmur, trying my hardest to suppress my own tears. It hurt, to be rejected so instantly, to never have even been given a chance. I always knew being with Zane would end up becoming an uphill battle, but I'd been deluding myself into thinking it would be bearable.

"What's going on?"

I look up to find Zane rushing up to us, his eyes wide with worry.

"You got here quickly," Sierra says, sounding relieved.

He glances between the two of us, a hint of confusion dancing in his eyes. "You sent me a panicked text telling me to come get Celeste, so of course I rushed over. What happened?"

He wraps an arm around each of us, and I bite down on my lip in an attempt to contain the pain. His hand wraps into my hair when I turn and lean into him, my nose pressed against his throat.

"It's my fault," Sierra says as she explains what happened. Hearing her recount the way her grandmother essentially banned me from every Windsor property rubs salt into my wounds, and I draw a shaky breath. It seems silly to cry over something like this, but I so desperately wanted to do something that'd make Zane happy. Lately, we've both started to worry about our future, and I wanted to prove to both him and myself that those worries are unwarranted. He's trying so hard with my grandfather, and I want to do the same for him too.

Zane sighs and wraps both arms around me, enveloping me in a tight hug right in the middle of his hotel lobby where anyone could see, but he doesn't seem to care. "Go back to Grandma," he tells Sierra. "Raven is probably having a hard time sweet-talking her and easing her anger. Do what you can there, alright?"

I hear her walk away, and Zane sighs. "My sweet Celestial," he murmurs, holding me tightly. "You don't have to do this for me. I don't ever want you to do anything that causes you pain. You don't need anyone's approval."

I lean back to look into his eyes, unsure how to explain. "I *want* to, because I want a future with you, Zane."

He cups my face, his gaze mirroring my own feelings. "Celeste Harrison, I love you with all my heart, and I always will — against all odds, regardless of what anyone might say or think. Do you understand?"

A tear runs down my cheek, and I nod. “I love you too, Zane. So much. I don’t want our relationship to cost you anything — I don’t want you to sacrifice anything for me.”

He wipes my tears away with his thumb, his breathing ragged. “We’re going to figure this out, okay? It may take a little bit of time, but it’s going to be okay. Eventually, we’ll just wear our grandparents down.”

He lifts my hand and turns my palm toward him, his eyes on mine as he kisses the inside of my wrist. “I love you, and someday, I’m going to make you my wife. That’s a vow, Celeste.”

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Chapter Twenty-Eight

CELESTE

I'm mentally exhausted as I push my thumb to Zane's front door, feeling oddly paranoid about his grandmother catching me on her property. Technically, I do have a standing formal invite, but it'd be impossible to explain that to her.

Zane and I have been doing all we can for months now, but nothing has changed. Anne Windsor tenses the second she sees me, her gaze always filled with mistrust and dislike. She seems to tolerate my friendship with Sierra these days, but mostly, she pretends I don't exist when she sees me. My grandfather does the same thing to Zane.

Neither of us is sure what to do — do we just tell them about us and deal with the fallout? We've been together for over a year now, and I know he's getting impatient. I can't blame him, since I feel the same way. It's the simple things I want, like being able to go on a date without having to worry about the gossip papers photographing us and putting us on the front page. I want everyone to know that he's mine, that Zane Windsor is spoken for.

"Oh! You're here!" I look up to find Raven walking up to me, the biggest smile on her face. She hugs me tightly, and moments later, Sierra comes rushing into the foyer, throwing herself against us and enforcing a group hug. "Can't breathe," Raven warns her, and she reluctantly lets go of us.

“I haven’t seen you in three weeks,” Sierra says, her gaze accusatory. “Honestly, do you even love me?”

I bite back a smile, my gaze landing on Zane who’s leaning in the doorway, simply watching us, his eyes twinkling with something that just soothes my soul. Being with him feels like coming home — I’ve never experienced anything like that before.

“Of course I love you,” I tell Sierra, unable to take my eyes off Zane. She huffs, clearly aware that she doesn’t have my attention.

Zane holds his hand out, and I grin as I walk up to him, entwining our fingers as soon as I’m within reach. His arm wraps around my waist, and he pulls me into him, his lips brushing against mine in a chaste kiss.

“Disgusting,” Lexington says from behind us, and I smirk at Zane’s youngest brother.

“Your face is disgusting,” I retort.

He walks up to me and musses my hair. “Not as disgusting as yours,” he says, before reaching for Sierra to do the same thing to her.

“Don’t you dare,” she snaps, taking a step back, her eyes narrowed. “Ares!” she calls, clearly hoping her eldest brother will get Lex in line.

Ares, Luca, and Dion walk into the foyer to see what’s going on, each of them offering me hugs when they spot me. “Lex,” Ares says, sounding exhausted. “Do you really want to risk Sierra’s wrath? Didn’t she remove the shoelaces from all of your shoes just last week? Why would you mess with someone who’s clearly fucking insane? Honestly, who even thinks of something weird like that?”

It’s funny, because we go through this exact scenario each time we gather, yet nothing ever changes. Lex will tease all of us in whatever way he can, Zane and Dion watch quietly with mild amusement, and Ares tells Lex off, with Luca backing him up.

Sierra stares at Ares openmouthed, and Raven tries her hardest to suppress a smile as she looks at Ares, the two of them sharing a moment I recognize — Zane and I do this often, looking at each other without having to say the words we’re thinking.

“Now that you’re here, we can finally have lunch,” Zane says, before kissing my temple. I nod and let him lead me to the observatory, his siblings in tow. Our monthly lunch tradition is a new one, and though he’d never admit it, I know it’s for my benefit. It’s his way of showing that his family does accept me, and that his grandmother is an exception.

We took slow steps forward, just like he told me we would, tackling one sibling of his after the other, with Sierra and Raven's help. It took a few months, but the Windsor siblings seem to have accepted me as one of their own. I just wish it were the same with my family too.

"Hey," I murmur, looking up at him.

He raises a brow and turns to face me. "Hmm?"

"My mom... did she call you today?"

Zane grins and nods. "Yep," he says, his eyes sparkling with affection. "She invited me over for dinner at your house, and she said your brother and father will both be there. I'm excited."

I force a smile and try my hardest not to worry. Mom asks about Zane often, and I know she calls him occasionally too. The two of them have rapidly formed a bond I'd be jealous of if I didn't love him so much. Archer and Dad, on the other hand, still treat him the way Zane's grandmother treats me. They haven't warmed up to him the way I'd hoped they would, and they mostly pretend our relationship doesn't exist. If we're lucky, this dinner will change everything. Dad and Archer would love him if they'd just take a moment to get to know him.

I desperately need that dinner to go well. We need one win, because I can tell that Zane is getting as discouraged as I am. Neither of our grandparents are warming to the idea of us, and we're not sure how to move forward in a way that won't cost us everything. I'd never forgive myself if I were the reason Zane lost the firm that used to belong to his mother's family. Upholding her legacy means everything to him.

"Should I bring some dessert, maybe? I could make a lemon pie?"

I grin at him and shake my head. "Just bring yourself, babe. You are more than enough."

He looks into my eyes, hearing the words I'm not saying. He's enough — no matter what anyone else says.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

ZANE

My hands are clammy as I tighten my grip around the bouquet I crafted for Celeste's mother, a bottle of whiskey in my other hand. I don't think I've ever been as nervous as I am right now, standing in front of my girlfriend's parents' house.

I inhale deeply and ring the bell. It opens moments later, and Archer appears in front of me with Celeste hot on his heels. Irritation is written all over his face, and I smile at him in response.

"Damn it, Arch," Celeste says, elbowing him hard. "I told you I'd get the door!"

"Had to see this for myself," he snaps. "Couldn't believe it when Mom told me to fly in to have dinner with your boyfriend. This is some bullshit. She didn't even ask me to fly in for her birthday, but she demands it for *him*?"

I sigh when Celeste pushes past him, frustration flickering through her eyes. It's obvious her family was hoping we wouldn't last. "Come in," she says, grabbing my hand.

I throw her a reassuring smile, and she relaxes just a touch as she leads me into the house. Her mom smiles when we walk into the kitchen, her eyes widening when she notices the roses I'm holding.

"Thank you so much for having me, ma'am," I tell her as I hand them to her.

“Oh, Zane,” she says, smiling in the most motherly way I’ve ever experienced. “These are lovely, but you really shouldn’t have — and how many times do I need to tell you to call me Clara?”

“They’re from his mother’s rose garden,” Celeste rushes to tell her. “Those roses... well, let’s just say that I’ve never received a full bouquet of my own.”

She throws me an accusatory look, and I shrug. “What can I say? I reserve those exclusively for my sister, my grandmother, my wife, and my mother-in-law.”

Celeste’s lips part in surprise, her eyes darkening as my words sink in. I love the way her cheeks become so beautifully pink, and she looks away, flustered.

Clara grins at the two of us, and relief surges through me when I realize she truly is the same as she has been over the phone. “How was the drive over?” she asks as I put the whiskey bottle I brought on the counter and rush to the sink to wash my hands, so I can help her.

“I live only a couple of minutes away, so it was a pleasant little drive.”

“Yeah? I’m glad. Did you have a good day at work today?”

I smile to myself, my heart warming. She’s been calling me every few weeks, and each time, she puts effort into getting to know me. It always startles me how genuine she is. Our phone calls were awkward at the start, but I’ve begun to look forward to them. I haven’t quite gathered enough courage to call her myself, but I’m getting there, slowly. My grandmother isn’t very motherly, but Clara... she’s exactly the way I sometimes imagine my mom would be.

Celeste seems to know what I’m thinking, because she gently rubs my bicep, a sweet smile on her face as I engage in small talk with her mother. “I’ll go set the table and see if Dad is doing okay,” Celeste tells us, and I nod at her, my eyes following her until the door falls closed behind her.

“You’ve got the love bug, don’t you?”

My eyes widen, and I nod. “Yes, ma’am. I’m afraid it’s incurable.”

She laughs and reaches up to muss my hair. “Come on then, we’d better go and convince my son and husband that you adore Celeste. I’ve loved everything I’ve learned about you so far, and I think they will too. But then again, I wouldn’t expect any different from Tara’s son.”

I blink in surprise. “You knew my mother?”

“We were childhood friends,” she says, her smile melting away. “I still think about her often, and I know she’d be proud to see the man you’ve become. I know I am.”

I stare at her in shock as she walks out of the kitchen, my heart overflowing with something that’s hard to define — it isn’t gratitude per se, but it’s something close to it. Her acceptance was so encouraging that I find myself smiling as I reach for the old whiskey bottle I brought with me.

Celeste’s dad is already seated at the dining table and gets up reluctantly when I walk in. He looks unhappy to see me and squeezes just a little harder than necessary when I shake his hand, but I try my hardest not to take it personally. “Thank you for having me, sir.”

He eyes the bottle I’m holding and sighs as he takes it from me. “It’s George, and I don’t like whiskey,” he says, despite the way his eyes glitter as he stares at it.

“Don’t lie, Dad,” Celeste says as she and Archer carry in tonight’s dishes. “It’s unbecoming.”

I bite back a smile when Archer’s brow rises the moment he spots the whiskey on the table. “That’s one rare bottle,” he remarks. “Bribing my dad, are you?”

I shrug. “Is it working?”

Celeste’s dad tries his best not to smile but fails, and he nods at the empty seat opposite Archer. “Sit there.”

I nod politely and do as I’m told, noting the tension in my girlfriend’s posture. If I look even a little bit uncomfortable, she’ll lose her shit, no doubt. Celeste is surprisingly protective of me, and it’s something I find endlessly adorable.

“That bottle,” she says as she sits down next to me, her voice soft. “That’s the one you said was your father’s, isn’t it?”

My head snaps up, and bewilderment rushes through me. I did mention that once, but it was months ago. How could she possibly have remembered that?

She reaches for it and shakes her head. “You can’t have that, Dad. Give it back.”

“Celeste,” I murmur, grabbing her hand as I throw her a look only she’ll understand. She looks into my eyes, her expression pained, and all it does is reassure me. I know she doesn’t like seeing me put in this much effort, but

it's nothing to me, since it's all for her. She sighs and sits back in defeat, and I just about manage to keep from bringing our joined hands to my lips.

"I hope you're hungry," Clara says, trying to lighten the mood.

George doesn't say a word, while Archer crosses his arms, glaring at me fiercely. "So how exactly did you go from being the boy that made my sister cry for years, to sitting at this table?"

Celeste sighs, and I place my hand on her knee. "By growing up, apologizing for my immaturity, and doing everything in my power to prove to Celeste that I love her with all my heart, that the mistakes I made when we were kids will never be repeated."

George's expression softens, and he tips his head toward the door. "Grab the bottle of whiskey your grandfather gave me for Christmas, and put this one away safely," he tells Archer.

Archer frowns, hesitating for a moment before he gets up and does his father's bidding. Clara smiles, seemingly pleased, but that doesn't ease my nerves at all.

"I can't," I say when George pours a glass of equally expensive whiskey and pushes it toward me. "I have to drive." I could call my driver, but I'd hate to bother him so late at night.

Clara grins at me and reaches over to pat my arm. "You can just spend the night here, sweetie."

"In the *guestroom*," George adds, his tone sharp.

I glance at Celeste, who nods subtly, a sweet smile on her face. "I'd be honored," I murmur, my heart overflowing with something akin to gratitude.

"To new beginnings, I suppose," George says, raising his glass.

I smile at him as I lift my glass and tap it against his. "New beginnings," I agree, the edges of my lips tipping up into a smile.

It doesn't matter how long it takes, but I'm going to win him over. I have to, because I don't think my goddess would ever be truly happy with me if our families don't give us their blessing. I know she's pretending to be strong for me, but she loves her family fiercely — even that stubborn grandfather of hers. I'll learn to love them, because I love *her*.

Chapter Thirty

CELESTE

I tiptoe across the hall moments after I hear the guest room door swing closed, my curiosity overflowing. After dinner, Archer, Dad, and Zane sat on the porch for ages, drinking and chatting together. I'm not sure what they discussed, and the frequent laughter I heard isn't as reassuring as I thought it'd be. Each time I tried to join, I was shooed away unceremoniously, and eventually, my mom banned me from trying to go out.

It doesn't matter how old I am, Mom will never cease to terrify me when she scolds me, which, in all fairness, happens very rarely. Perhaps that's why I heed her words more than I do anyone else's.

Zane looks up when I walk into the guestroom, a slow smile transforming his face. "My goddess," he whispers, slurring his words slightly. He has lost his suit jacket, waistcoat, and tie, and the way he rolled up the sleeves of his shirt is ridiculously sexy.

He cups my face, and I study him carefully. It sounded like things went well, but I can't help but worry nonetheless. Both Archer and Dad are incredibly protective, and the thought of them being mean to Zane or making him feel unwelcome just breaks my heart.

"Is this a dream?" Zane asks.

I grin at him and shake my head. "No, boyfriend dearest. This is all very real, but I'll admit you're a dream come true."

He sighs as he drops his forehead to mine. "I love you, Celeste." He grabs my hand and places my palm on his chest. "I love you so much that it hurts here."

My stomach flutters, and I grin as I slowly unbutton his shirt. He wouldn't believe me if I told him I love him more. Zane doesn't get drunk often, but when he does, he gets adorably stubborn. "I'll kiss it better," I promise him.

"You have to," he tells me. "My heart is yours now, so you have to take good care of it."

"I will, my love."

"Is that a vow?" he asks, his gaze heated.

I nod. "I vow to take great care of your heart, Zane. It's mine now, isn't it? I'll keep it always."

His shirt falls open, and I run my hands over his chest in appreciation. I should be used to the sight of him now, but I don't think I'll ever tire of it. "This isn't a dream, is it?" he asks, his hand threading through my hair. "You have to tell me if it is."

"It's not a dream, babe."

"Okay, good, because I'm going to kiss you, and I don't want to wake up and find out it wasn't real. That happened a few times. A lot of times, actually."

I chuckle, and Zane cuts me off by pulling me closer, making me crash into him. He dips his head and kisses me slowly. I moan and push my hands up his chest until I've got them hooked around the back of his neck.

"So perfect for me," he whispers, walking me back until I fall onto his bed. He grins as he places his knee between my legs. "I can't tell what's real anymore, because when I'm with you, it feels like all my dreams have come true."

My heart skips a beat when he pulls his shirt off and throws me one of those smirks he knows I can't resist. "Zane Windsor," I whisper. "Don't be a tease."

He leans over me and runs the tips of his fingers down my stomach. "But I love teasing you, Celeste. I love everything about you, but I love the way you beg the most."

He pushes my underwear aside and looks at me through his lashes, his gaze heady as he coats his finger in my wetness. "Such a pretty pussy. You know what's best about it?"

I shake my head as he pushes two fingers in. “It isn’t how greedy this pussy is, or even how incredible it tastes. Nah. The best part is that it’s *mine. Forever.* My touch is the first and last it’ll ever know.”

“*Only,*” I correct him, admitting something I haven’t before. “Your touch is the only one I’ll ever know.”

Zane blinks, and then a wide grin spreads across his face. “Did you know you’re my only too? You’re the only woman I’ve ever slept with, Celeste. My first, my last, my only.”

I blink in disbelief as he draws circles around my clit. “Then... then how did you... how did you become so good at this?”

“Watched a lot of porn,” he says, shrugging, a cute drunk smile on his face. “And I’m a quick study. When it comes to you, I’m eager to please.”

“Zane,” I moan when he continues to tease me, his slow pace maddening. “God, I’m so in love with you.”

“Yeah. You are, aren’t you? It’s crazy. You’re a goddess, and I... well, I’m not worthy.”

He pushes his fingers in and curls them, making me bite down on my lip to keep from moaning. I can never resist him — I didn’t even come in here expecting anything. I just wanted to see if he was doing okay and kiss him goodnight.

“Please,” I whisper.

He grins as he pulls his fingers away. “Please what, Celestial?”

I lift my hips and push my panties down entirely. “Please fuck me, Zane. *Please.*”

He inhales shakily, his gaze so adoring that it makes my heart overflow with a kind of tenderness I’ve never felt for anyone but him. “You’re such a good girl, aren’t you?” he whispers. “You look so pretty when you beg for my cock.”

I watch impatiently as he puts his hands on the buttons of his suit pants, his movements slow. Just as he’s got the button undone, someone knocks on his door.

“Zane?”

His eyes widen. “Fuck. It’s my brother-in-law.”

“Your *what?*”

He doesn’t respond as he pulls me upright and looks around the room. “Get... get under the bed.” I stare at him wide-eyed, uncertain whether I

should be amused or offended. “Quick! I can’t get caught with you in my bed! I finally got him to like me!”

I bite back a smile and do as he asked, hiding myself moments before my brother walks into the room. “You’re still awake,” Archer says, slightly slurring his words. “I b-brought you a towel, and s-some of my clothes to wear. Spare toothbrush too.”

I hear some shuffling in the room and peek from underneath the bed to find my brother smiling at Zane. “As far as boyfriends go, you’re not so bad, I guess,” he adds.

Zane looks up at him wide-eyed. “Thanks, man.”

“She’s happy, I know that. I can see it in the way she smiles, the way she looks at you. For years, you made my sister so damn sad, and I still want to make you pay for it. But fucking hell, Zane, at the same time I don’t think I’ve ever seen her as happy as you make her. I wish you were a dick. Would make things m-much easier.”

I only just about manage to keep from laughing. I never knew my brother could be that cute, and the way Zane stares up at him all wide-eyed is equally cute. I can’t believe I’m witnessing the making of a true bromance.

“Thanks,” Zane stammers. “I appreciate it. I love her, you know?”

Archer sighs and shakes his head as he walks to the door. “Yeah, I know.” He opens the door and looks back. “Welcome to family, asshole. I doubt you w-will, but try not to give me another reason to punch you in the face. Pretty sure my little sister likes that face quite a bit. I’d hate to ruin it.”

Then he walks out, the door slamming closed behind him far louder than necessary. Zane stares at it as I wiggle out from under the bed, unable to keep from smiling. “I think...” I murmur. “I think you and my brother just became... friends?”

“Friends?”

I nod, endlessly amused by his disarmed expression. Tonight has gone far better than I ever could’ve hoped for. Now we just need to tackle our grandparents — but that was always going to be the hardest part.

Chapter Thirty-One

CELESTE

Mom and I glare at the three men seated at the breakfast bar in the kitchen, Zane in the middle. “So, did you guys learn anything from drinking as much as you did last night?” I ask, my tone terse.

I watch as my dad knocks his shoulder against Zane’s and leans in. “Remember that you chose this. It’s not too late to walk away from her, you know? She’s destined to become as crazy as her mother.”

Mom straightens her spine and tips her head toward Dad. “What was that?” she asks, her tone deceptively light.

Dad clears his throat just as Archer leans into Zane. “If you want to survive being with Celeste, don’t be as dumb as my dad is.”

Meanwhile, Zane just stares at me, beaming. Despite clearly being hungover, I don’t think I’ve seen him look this happy in a while. The burden of our families not accepting us being together had begun to weigh heavy on him, and last night seems to have lifted some of it.

“I’m sorry, Celestial,” Zane says, his tone earnest. “I won’t drink this much next time, alright? Archer and I just couldn’t say no to your dad.”

Dad’s head snaps to Zane, and his eyes widen. “You’re throwing me under the bus?”

Archer chuckles and wraps his arm around Zane, nodding before he glances at Dad. “Better you than us.”

Mom turns to me and smiles. “He calls you Celestial?”

I blush instantly. Normally, Zane only ever calls me Celestial or Goddess in private, and I doubt he realized that it'd slipped out. Mom chuckles and brushes my hair out of my face, her gaze endearing. It's clear she really likes Zane, and it makes me happier than I can convey.

"Alright, Archer and Zane," Mom says, her smile slipping away as she faces them. "If there's one thing we do in this house, it's taking responsibility for our actions and being accountable. You chose to drink last night, so you'll live with the consequences today. Saturday mornings are for cooking classes, so suck it up, and go get me some veggies from the vegetable patch. You can choose whatever you'd like. We're making our own variation of the British roast dinner that Celeste won't stop gushing about."

They both hang their heads, like the thought of having to move from their chairs is too much, and for a moment I consider just taking Zane home to recover. "Now," Mom snaps, and I involuntarily flinch.

The boys move quickly, both clearly aware that my normally incredibly sweet mother is annoyed with them. Dad chuckles, and Mom sighs. "I'm not happy with you either. How could you get the boys so drunk, George?"

He slips out of his seat and wraps his arm around her shoulder. "It's called bonding, sweetheart. It accomplished what you hoped it would, right? I do quite like the boy, and so does Archer, like you said we would."

Mom sighs when he presses a soft kiss to her temple. "You reek of liquor. The next time you want to bond with the boys, try not to poison them and yourself."

I grin, relieved to hear what I already suspected — that last night's dinner was a success. For months, Dad refused to even let Zane step foot into our house, and I spent week after week telling him little things that melted his cold exterior. I'd tell him about the food Zane cooked me, things he fixed around my house, and strategic advice he gave me that benefited our company. He'd huff and ignore my words, but I knew he was listening.

Slow steps, just like Zane said. "I love you, Dad," I murmur, my heart overflowing. "I know this wasn't easy for you, and I want you to know I'm grateful. Zane makes me happy, and I want him to feel welcome here."

Dad's eyes widen, and for a few moments, he looks visibly emotional. "I love you too, sweetie. I'm sorry for taking so long to give him a chance."

He holds his arm out for me, and I smile as I walk into his embrace. His refusal to accept Zane wasn't just tough on my relationship with Zane, it

affected my relationship with my parents too. The bitterness I felt grew slowly, only for it all to fade away this morning.

I step away when Archer and Zane walk into the kitchen, laughing at something. Zane shouldn't look so sexy in my brother's old gray sweatpants and a ratty white t-shirt, but God, he does. His eyes catch mine, and he pauses, just staring at me for a moment, until Archer slaps his back, *hard*. "That's my *sister*, you asshole."

Zane snaps out of it and puts the veggies down on the counter, a sly smile on his face as he shrugs. "That's my girlfriend, Archer. I can't help it."

I still melt every time he calls me his girlfriend, and he knows it. My cheeks are blazing as I begin to wash the vegetables, and I try my hardest not to check Zane out as he walks up to me to wash his hands. The heat of his body next to mine is so incredibly tempting, and the way his fingers trail over mine under the water stream makes me wish I could just kiss him right here and now. His eyes find mine, and he smirks knowingly before pulling away and drying his hands. I'll make him pay for teasing me later, and I just know we'll both enjoy every second of it.

"Sorry I'm late! Clara told me to get some things!"

I look up when Lily comes rushing in, a sack of potatoes in her arms. She freezes mid-step, her eyes widening when she spots Zane. The color leeches from her face, and she frowns. "Zane?"

He smiles awkwardly. "Lily," he says, nodding at her politely. It must be odd for him to see one of his employees in such an informal situation. Each time I invite Lily to hang out with us, she declines for that exact reason.

"This is weird. I can't believe I have to see my boss on a Saturday."

Dad wraps his arm around her and shakes his head. "He's not your boss here," he tells her, his tone reassuring. "He's just Celeste's boyfriend."

Her eyes widen in surprise, and she glances at me. I nod at her excitedly. For months, she's had to hear me complain about how I didn't think my parents would ever accept Zane. I'm pretty sure she was getting tired of it, but she never stopped encouraging me.

Lily smiles at me before walking over to Mom, but I notice the way she ignores Zane as best as she can the entire time. I know she's been worried about me, but I hope that in time, she'll begin to believe that he truly doesn't have any bad intentions toward me.

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Chapter Thirty-Two

ZANE

I smile as Archer steps out of his car and looks up at my mansion in surprise. “Sometimes I forget that you’re a Windsor, you know?”

“I’m glad to hear it,” I say as I lead him into my home. Over the last couple of months, Archer and I became friends — something neither of us expected. He’d extended an olive branch and asked for my help choosing a new car, and I offered him one of Windsor Motors’ new models. Both of us were just trying our best for the woman we love, but in doing so, we got to know each other and found that we had a lot more in common than we thought.

“Are you sure it’s okay if I join?” he asks nervously.

I smirk at him, surprised to find him so anxious tonight. I suppose I succeeded a little too well in making him forget who I am, other than his sister’s boyfriend. “Of course. Poker night is an informal kind of thing. It’s just my brothers and me, and it’s only fair to include my brother-in-law.”

Archer shakes his head. “You do realize you’re not actually married to Celeste, right?”

I shrug. “Not yet.”

His expression falls, and the sympathy in his gaze nearly wrecks me. It never hurts any less to know that no one around us believes we’ll make it, not truly, not without sacrifices that might destroy us.

My brothers and Xavier look up when we walk in, and I frown when Ares sighs and reaches for his wallet to pull out a fifty. Lex grins as he takes it wordlessly and leans back in his seat, looking pleased with himself. What the fuck were they betting on?

“This is Archer Harrison,” I tell them. “Celeste’s brother.”

Luca narrows his eyes. “You’re the co-owner of Serenity Solutions, aren’t you?”

Archer nods, his shoulders stiff. I’ve never seen him nervous before. “Luca Windsor,” he replies. “CEO of The Windsor Bank and Windsor Finance, right? It’s an honor to meet you.”

The two men shake hands, and I smile as they instantly begin to chat about the similarities in their businesses.

“Nice,” Lex says. “You actually brought someone interesting, instead of the trash Dion always drags in with him.”

I glance at Xavier’s unamused expression and bite back a smile as I sit down at the dining table. “You do realize I’m at least as rich as any of you guys, right?” he mutters. “Honestly, the abuse I put up with just to see my best friend when he’s in town.” He throws Dion a pointed look. “You owe me for this.”

Dion chuckles and shakes his head. “Fuck no. I know better than to owe a Kingston a favor. I don’t owe you shit. If anything, *you* owe *me* for literally being your only friend.”

Xavier raises his brow. “You say that like you have any other friends yourself. Your siblings don’t count, they have to like you.”

I just about keep from rolling my eyes as everyone at the table chats utter garbage. The only quiet one is Ares, who shuffles the cards. “Grandma told me you asked to meet with her next week,” he says, his voice soft. “She called me trying to figure out what you needed, because your tone had apparently worried her.”

“She must know about you two,” Dion says. “Celeste is at the Windsor Estate several times a week, and even if she doesn’t go anywhere near Grandma’s house, Grams would’ve been notified of her frequent visits by now, right?”

I shake my head and throw Archer a reassuring look. The mere mention of Celeste has his guard up. “I asked Silas to keep it quiet,” I mention, referring to our Head of Security.

Dion looks skeptical. “Silas can’t be fully trusted. He works for Grandma, not us, and he always has an agenda of his own. Besides, it’s been nearly two years. She knows, she’s just ignoring your relationship in hopes it goes away.”

“It won’t.”

Luca turns to look at me, his expression conveying his concern. “Is that what this is, then?”

“Yeah,” I murmur, a hint of excitement in my voice.

Lex shakes his head and pours me a glass of whiskey. “You’re going to have to go down on your hands and knees.”

“For what?” Archer asks, his tone sharp.

Luca smiles despite the clear concern in his gaze. “For a chance to marry your sister. Long before he’ll ever ask your father for her hand, he’ll have to convince our grandmother.”

Archer tenses. “I thought you two said you’d take it slow? I don’t know about your grandmother, but for sure, the time isn’t right for my grandfather. The man disowned me because I refused to run his company *exactly* the way he wanted me to, because I wouldn’t commit to it the way he expected, wouldn’t make the sacrifices he demanded. What do you think he’ll do to Celeste if she tells him you’re not only dating, but she wants to *marry* you?”

I look down at the table. He wasn’t telling me anything I hadn’t considered a thousand times already.

“I like you, Zane,” Archer continued, “but being disowned is tough — it’s a rift between people who love each other. It’s missed birthdays, grudges, and blame thrown back and forth. It’s not something I want for my sister. Why don’t you wait a little longer? From what I understand, Grandpa has just about started to treat you civilly, and I believe your grandmother is in the same place. What happened to your plans to slowly warm them to the idea of you?”

“We *have* taken it slow,” I tell him, my tone understanding. “Celeste and I spoke about this, and we’re both tired of waiting and having this hang over our heads. We’ve been tiptoeing around our grandparents for their benefit, but enough is enough. I want it all with her, Arch. She wouldn’t admit it, but the uncertainty is tough on her, and it’s tough on me too. I’m tired of treating the woman I love like some kind of dirty secret, when enough time has passed for us both to know this isn’t just a fling. I’m more

sure than ever that she is it for me. There's no point in waiting any longer, because that isn't going to change. Whether it's today or in three years, I'll always choose her. If there are consequences tied to that, I might as well face them now."

My brothers share a look, only to nod and straighten their shoulders. "We'll all come with you," Ares says.

"We love her, too," Luca adds.

Lex smirks at me. "She's pretty much already a sister to me, so we might as well help you formalize it."

Dion reaches over and places his hand on my shoulder. "Not all of us will get the kind of happiness you two share, Zane. We'll do what we can to safeguard yours."

I inhale shakily as I take in my brothers' unwavering support. I can't find the right words to convey my gratitude, but I'll repay them for this when the time is right.

Chapter Thirty-Three

ZANE

“Are you sure about this?” Ares asks, his expression as worried as Luca, Dion, and Lex’s. I nod, trying my best not to let their obvious concern get to me. The fact they’re here at all means they believe there’s a chance this could work, and that’s all I really need — a chance.

“Come on then,” Lex says, his arm wrapping around me. “Let’s give it our best shot.”

The air around us is charged with cautious hope and a sense of camaraderie I wouldn’t have found with anyone other than my brothers. Today, more than ever, I’m grateful to have them by my side.

Grandma looks up in surprise when we walk into her sitting room, her raised brow the only indication of any emotions she might be feeling. As always, she looks perfect in her matching black tweed skirt and jacket, her shoulder-length gray hair perfectly straight.

“Boys,” she says, her tone sharper than usual. “To what do I owe this pleasure? I was only expecting Zane.”

I step forward and take a seat on the sofa opposite her, my brothers on either side of me. “I’m sure you have a good idea of what brings me here today,” I tell her, my voice soft yet firm.

She sighs, irritation and resignation warring in her stern gaze. “Do enlighten me.”

“Celeste Harrison,” I tell her.

“No,” she instantly cuts me off, crossing her arms.

“This isn’t mere infatuation, Grandma. I’ve been dating her for nearly two years now, and I’m happier than I ever have been before. I want to marry her.”

Grandma laughs in obvious disbelief, the sound chilling. “Perhaps I am at fault here for turning a blind eye, thinking time would show you the rationale behind the advice you refuse to take from me.”

“She loves him too,” Luca says, his tone a pleading lilt to it. “We were as skeptical as you are, Grandma, but we wouldn’t be here today if we didn’t wholeheartedly believe Zane and Celeste should be together.”

Ares wraps his arm around my shoulder and nods. “It makes sense from a practical point of view too. If we merged Harrison Developments and Windsor Hotels, the resulting company would be unrivaled. Combine that with Zane and Celeste’s affinity with each other, and you’re left with synergies that most companies wouldn’t even dare dream of. Their union would benefit our family.”

Grandma rises to her feet and begins to pace. “Benefit?” she repeats. “It would destroy us.” She turns to me then, her gaze filled with something close to heartbreak. “Zane, can’t you see what’s been happening? She’s been using you to solidify her position as her grandfather’s successor — every single one of the strategic decisions she made had *you* written all over them. Did you think I wouldn’t realize? The only reason I let it be was because I was certain you’d catch on sooner or later.”

Lex tenses and shakes his head before I can. “Celeste isn’t like that,” he argues. “Have you ever met her, Grandma? She reminds me a lot of Sierra. Celeste is hardworking, smart, and incredibly kind — all qualities you’ve tried to instill in us. I understand that marriage is a big step, but if you’d just get to know her, you’d understand why them being together makes perfect sense.”

Luca nods. “She’s not her grandfather. The resentment between the Harrisons and Windsors shouldn’t extend any further, not when it doesn’t need to.”

Grandma looks crestfallen, her expression slowly morphing into that same old one we grew up with — the one that tells us she means well, that everything she does is for us. “Zane,” she says, her tone pleading. “She’s a Harrison, and I know you might find this hard to believe, but chances are she has ulterior motives. Perhaps the plan truly was to marry you eventually

and gain access to our wealth that way, but I suspect her motives are far more unscrupulous. I cannot welcome a Harrison into our family. In time, you'll understand, and you'll thank me for it. I'm sure."

I look down at my hands, my heart sinking. I'd hoped she'd hear me out at the very least, but the mere idea of us offends her. How would Celeste feel if we get married, and she's forced to endure my grandmother's scorn for the rest of our lives?

"I'm sorry, Grandma. I know it sounds like I'm asking for permission to marry her, but I'm not. One way or another, I'll make Celeste my wife. I'd rather do it with your blessing, not just because it'd kill me to let you down, but also because I know it'd destroy Celeste if I go against your wishes. Regardless of what you may think of her, she's got the biggest heart and the kindest soul. If being with her ends up costing me, she'll never forgive herself, and I love her too much to do that to her if I can help it."

I draw a shaky breath and rise to my feet to walk over to her, taking her hand as I slowly drop to my knees in front of her. "Please," I murmur, both of my hands wrapped around hers. "Please, Grandma, let me marry the woman I love. Allow me to be happy, because I can guarantee that I won't have a single day of happiness if I'm not sharing my life with her — even before we were together, my life revolved around her. You know that as well as I do. How often did I complain about her growing up? You, more than anyone, know how much of an impact she's always had on me. That will never change. I can't be me without her, Grams."

She tightens her grip on my hand, her eyes filling with grief I hadn't expected to find. "I'm sorry, Zane. Truly. I know it seems like I'm depriving you of your happiness, and I truly do see how much you love her, but I can't allow you to marry her. We cannot join hands with Ed Harrison or anyone related to him. Your grandfather would turn in his grave if we did. I can't let history repeat itself."

Her eyes snap up, and I glance over my shoulder to find Dion stepping forward. "Please," he says as he drops to his knees next to me. "I've never seen Zane as happy as he is with her. If you tear them apart, it'd destroy him. I can't lose another family member, Grandma, please."

A tear rolls down her face as Lexington, Ares, and Luca join us, putting me in front of her with two of my brothers on either side of me. "We'll make whatever sacrifices we must if you'll let him marry her," Ares promises.

“We wouldn’t be here today if we didn’t love her too,” Luca adds.

Lex reaches for her and swipes away her tears. “She’s already one of us, Grandma. It isn’t just Zane you’ll hurt by ripping them apart. She’s as much my sister as Sierra is.”

Grandma sniffs and shakes her head, her expression hardening. “No,” she says, before looking at me. “You’re young, Zane. You’ll find someone better. It’ll hurt right now, but you’ll heal, and you’ll be better for it.”

I pull my hand out of hers and draw a shaky breath. “I understand that you’re within your rights to decline, and I respect your decision, Grandma,” I tell her, my heartache bittersweet. “But I hope you also understand that I’ll walk away from my inheritance and Windsor Hotels for her. Without Celeste, the money isn’t worth anything. I love you, but I refuse to live in the past when I can see such a bright future ahead of me, with *her*.”

Dion wraps his arm around my shoulder. “Zane isn’t the only grandson you’ll lose,” he says, his voice soft. “We’ve lost so much, Grams. You were there to pick up the pieces, but I won’t stand here and let you destroy what we rebuilt.”

“I won’t be threatened,” she says, her soft voice unnerving. “Each of you will marry a woman of my choosing, and I will never choose Celeste Harrison. I’ll gladly donate all of my assets to charity before I let her get her hands on a single dime your grandfather and I earned. You have one month, Zane. Walk away from her, or walk away from your parents’ legacy.”

Chapter Thirty-Four

CELESTE

I'm restless as I pace in front of the window, waiting for Zane. It's been hours since he went to his grandmother's house to tell her about us, and I'm increasingly becoming more nervous. In this case, no news is *not* good news.

I jump when my phone rings, only for my heart to sink when I see it's Lily and not Zane. I nearly decline her call out of fear I'll miss Zane's texts, but decide against it at the last second. If anyone can calm me down now, it's Lily.

"Hey," I murmur, my voice shaky.

Sniffling greets me on the other end of the line, and I tense, worry instantly taking hold of me. "C-Celeste?"

I tighten my grip on the phone as I take in her ragged breathing. "What happened?" I ask, my voice betraying my concern.

Lily begins to cry in earnest and I freeze for a split-second, before jumping into action and finding my keys. "C-can we p-please talk?" she stammers. "I n-never intended—I..."

"Where are you?" I ask, something about her tone putting me on edge. I haven't heard her sound so distressed in years, not since we got the news that her mother's murderer was finally arrested. "Tell me where you are, Lil. Whatever happened, it's going to be okay. I'll come to you right now, okay?"

“Yes, I think this is... it’s s-something I s-should tell you in person. I’m... I’m at... at The King’s Bridge.”

My stomach twists violently, every instinct in my body telling me something I can’t quite decipher. “What are you doing there, Lil?” I ask, my voice trembling. She sobs in response, her grief so fierce that it robs her of her words. “I’m five minutes away,” I tell her, my tone soothing despite my unease.

It hasn’t happened in years, but when we were younger, the grief her mother left her with threatened to consume her more than once. Each time, she’d find herself at The King’s Bridge, and thankfully, each time, she asked for help before it was too late.

I just hope I’m not too late this time either.

“Three minutes,” I tell her, driving faster than I reasonably should. “You know I love you, right?” My voice breaks, desperation shining through as I follow my instincts, reminding her that she’s loved beyond measure, that she’s *needed*. “You’re the sister I never had, Lil. The person who reminds me of my worth, the one who motivates me and sees the best in me when I can’t.”

“Celeste,” she sobs. “Oh god, what have I done? I can’t...”

My eyes widen when the bridge comes into view, panic gripping me tightly when I see her sitting on the ledge. I jump out of the car, leaving the door open as I walk up to her. “Please,” I tell her, my steps slow. “Please come here, and we’ll talk.”

She lowers her phone and shakes her head before leaning back a little. “Stop there, or I’ll jump,” she warns, her eyes wide with something I can’t quite name. Panic? Delirium?

I freeze in place and hold my hands up in surrender, tears gathering in my eyes. “Don’t do this,” I plead, my voice trembling. “I will fix what’s wrong, Lil. I’ll fix it, so come here, and let me help you. Please, Lily. I can’t live without you. You know that, don’t you?”

She shakes her head and crosses her arms, balancing herself on the edge. My heart hammers in my chest as I watch her, fear making me feel nauseous. “You’ll be fine, Celeste. We hardly see each other, and we don’t talk as often as we used to. Each time you called, I had an excuse ready, didn’t I? It’s my fault that you’re better friends with Sierra and Raven now. I wonder if that was part of the reason, you know?”

I begin to shake, my tears falling uncontrollably. “Is this about them? I’ll do better, Lily. I never meant to neglect you or our friendship. I would never abandon you, not ever. I love you with all my heart — you’re a part of me, Lil. I’d never have made it through high school without you, nor college for that matter. I will always need you, your encouraging words and your sweet smiles, your voice of reason when I’m being irrational, your hugs, and your ability to make me laugh when life gets tough. Tell me what I can do to make this better. I’ll do anything, Liliana.” My tone conveys my desperation, my love for her, and I pray it reaches her. I’m so tempted to rush over and yank her toward me, toward safety, but the look in her eyes keeps me rooted in place.

Lily smiles at me, her heartbreak evident through her tears. “You can’t save me this time, Celeste,” she says, her voice disappearing into the whipping wind around us. “You can’t save me from myself — and you won’t want to. N-Not after what I’m about to tell you.”

“Okay,” I tell her soothingly, my breathing ragged. “How about you tell me what happened first, then?” She won’t believe me if I say she’s worth saving regardless of what led her here. If I play my cards right and show her that her worries aren’t worth her life, I might be able to talk her off the ledge.

She looks into my eyes, her own filled with an ocean of tears. In all the years I’ve known her, I’ve never seen her look at me with such remorse in her expression. “Celeste,” she says, her voice breaking. “I’ve been s-seeing Zane... ever s-since I started working for him.”

I stare at her blankly, the words not registering until she buries her face in her hands, her body rocking with the force of her sobs. “*What?*”

She nods and tries her hardest to face me, the guilt in her eyes hitting harder now. “It started off as simple f-flirtatiousness, but it turned into more in a matter of w-weeks. I fought it, I really did — I knew you h-hated him, and I couldn’t forgive him for... for the way he treated you when we were younger, but he... he blew past my defenses so e-easily. It was the hand-picked flowers, the intimate lunch dates, and the trips he’d take me on to inspect his hotels.”

I sink to my knees on the cold tarmac, my mind whirling. “That can’t be true,” I whisper, trying to make sense of what she’s telling me.

“I’m so sorry,” she says, her voice still trembling but calmer now. “I know you won’t ever be able to forgive me for this, and I can’t forgive m-

myself either. I thought that... that... that somehow, it would be okay in the end. We both know that your families won't allow this, so I was going to wait for you to move on and find real happiness, the kind that you deserve — untainted love, with s-someone who didn't play a role in your worst memories. I thought that once you're happy... then maybe it wouldn't matter, and I..."

My heart is pounding in my ears, and nausea makes my stomach flip. "It's okay," I say nonetheless, holding my hand out. "He doesn't matter more than you do." The words feel false on my lips, coming out rushed, and she looks at me like she doesn't believe me. "We'll figure this out, Lily."

She shakes her head. "He loves you now," she says. "Zane wants to *marry* you, and he's willing to give everything up for you. I can't even blame him, you know? You're so perfect, and I love you just as much as he does. I can't fault his choice, understand it even. Between me and you, I'd also choose you. I knew it the moment I saw you two together at your parents' house when he was supposed to be on a business trip."

She looks over her shoulder, at the dark water below, and I lean forward, toward her. Lily's head whips back to mine, and I freeze when she throws me a warning look. Trepidation seizes me now, in a way it never has before. In the past, looking down brought fear to her eyes — now, it makes her smile.

"He ended things with me, and I'm a little relieved, you know? Each time I thought of the future, I'd envision having to lie to you and tell you we didn't start dating until after you two broke up — but I'd planned to, because that's just how badly I want to be with him. It's sick, isn't it? You should've been the one I loved more than anything, but I still did what I did because I couldn't resist him. He just made me feel so seen, so loved. He made me laugh, Celeste."

Tears spill from my eyes, and I try my hardest to trap the sob in my throat. Everything she's explaining, it's how he made me feel too. "I love you," I tell her. "I love you regardless, and if Zane is the kind of man that would do this, cheating on both of us, then we don't need him in our lives. We just need each other, Lily. Please, come here, and we'll figure this out."

A spark of hope shines in her eyes, and I stretch out my arm, holding my hand out for her. She stares at it and shakes her head. "You won't forgive me," she murmurs. "Not truly. This will always stand between us, and I'll never be able to forgive myself. Things will never be the same

between us, and I... I know his allure, Celeste. He'll make excuses, and you'll forgive him. I've never seen you love anyone the way you love him — there's nothing you won't forgive. Just like you love me enough to forgive me for this, you'll forgive him too, and I can't be around to witness that. I can't watch you marry him."

"I won't," I promise her. "I won't marry him."

She looks into my eyes and smiles, her expression somber, resigned. "I love you, Celeste. I hope you can find it in your heart to forgive me, but I can't bear that look in your eyes. I deserve to be punished for my sins, and I will be, I'm sure of it."

"*Lily*," I yell, my tone hysterical.

"I really do love you," she says, the wind carrying her words to me. She smiles at me, her heartbreak evident, and I leap forward just as she lets herself fall backward.

My fingers graze over her body, but I'm too late.

Too late to save her.

Chapter Thirty-Five

CELESTE

My hand trembles as I walk into the cabin Lily and I spent so many nights in, my eyes stinging. My phone hasn't stopped ringing once in the last twenty-four hours, but I know Zane can't reach me here. This place was just ours, Lily's and mine.

My conversation with her keeps running through my mind, and I can't help but wonder where I went wrong. Should I have leaped at her and pulled her away from the ledge the moment I saw her sitting there? Something told me she would've simply jumped immediately had I tried, but I wish I'd done it anyway. The outcome couldn't have been worse than it is now — with my best friend's body somewhere at the bottom of the river, while dozens of divers try to find her.

Does Zane know? He must've been informed by now. Is he as heartbroken as I am? Did he ever love her the way she clearly loved him? My fingers trail over the wall filled with pictures of Lily and me, our life displayed in chronological order, each memory more painful than the last.

I tense when I notice an envelope on the table we sat at when we tried out a Ouija board and freaked ourselves out at age fourteen, only to drown our fears by taking our first ever shots. It's where we shared meals and played games, where we studied together, and opened our college admission emails.

I pick up the letter with shaking hands, recognizing her beautiful handwriting. She always made the C in my name look so pretty, and I clutch it to my chest, unable to open it, unable to even see through my tears. I know what this letter is, and I can't bear myself to face the truth. That she's gone — that she knew she wouldn't make it back from that bridge.

I sink to the floor, holding a small part of her to me as I silently beg for this all to be a bad dream, for them to find her alive and well, despite all the time that's passed.

My entire body shakes from the force of my sobs as I open the envelope, the paper nearly slipping out of my hands twice as I unfold it.

Dear Celeste,

If you're reading this, I succumbed to my shame and left you here all alone — in this place where we created some of my most precious memories.

You're probably crying, aren't you? Please don't — I promise I'm not worth your tears. No one is, Celeste. There isn't a person in this world that deserves you, and I know I certainly never did.

You saved me, and instead of repaying you, I betrayed you. Is it selfish that I'm glad I won't have to see the betrayal in your eyes?

Yeah, it definitely is, isn't it?

I am sorry, Celeste. More than you'll ever know. If I could turn back time and undo

what I've done, I would. I wish I hadn't been so foolish, so tempted by the illusion of happiness. I never meant to hurt you, never meant to deceive both myself and you.

If I could make one last wish, it'd be to earn your forgiveness while taking Lane Windsor to hell with me. I hope one day, he'll understand what it's like to lose everything you hold dear in life, to look around and find the broken pieces of your heart in each place that had become meaningful simply because of the memories you made there.

You'll never know how sorry I am, Celeste. I know I couldn't have atoned in this lifetime, no matter what I did, but I hope you rest easy knowing I'll be punished for my sins where I am now. I know what you're like, and I know you'll wonder if there's anything you could've done, if any part of you is to blame. I need you to know that this was all me - you were not at fault, not in any way.

There is nothing you could've done to stop this, to save me. I was beyond saving long before I wrote this letter, and part of me knew it - it's why I began to avoid you and

came up with excuses each time you wanted to see me. I'm a coward, Celeste. Right till the end. I couldn't face you, you know? I couldn't look into the eyes of the woman I loved more than any other and pretend I wasn't praying for your heart to break.

I hope you find the happiness you deserve and the kind of love people write books about. You deserve no less than an epic kind of love – one that's untainted by the painful history you shared with Zane, one I've undoubtedly added to.

You are magic, Celeste. Don't you ever forget it.

I love you

- Lily

My tears fall onto the paper, causing the ink to blotch in a few places, and that only makes me cry harder. I press Lily's letter to my chest, grief swallowing me whole. My mind is reeling to a point where I haven't even been able to think about Zane yet, and everything I've learned about him, about us.

"Oh god, Lil," I whisper, my voice breaking. "Please." I desperately beg every god in existence to bring her back to me, knowing deep down that it's futile. I'm shaking so hard I barely manage to pull myself back onto my feet, needing another piece of her, something that'll keep me close to her.

My eyes settle on her journal, and I reach for it with trembling hands. I know I shouldn't read it, but I can't stop myself. Perhaps it's because part of me is in disbelief. Despite everything, I'm hoping that it's all one big misunderstanding, that Zane never cheated on me, and that I didn't lose my best friend in the process, that the future I thought lay ahead of me isn't built on lies.

I open it on a random page toward the end and nearly close it straight away, my lungs burning and my vision blurry. *Dear Mom*, it reads. I'd forgotten — Lily always addressed everything in her diary to her mother. Reading this feels like the worst violation of her privacy, yet I can't help myself. I need to know, I need to see what transpired between her and Zane, and I need to hear it from Lily. I flick through the pages until I find the start of the end.

Dear Mom,

I didn't think I'd get the job after getting so many rejections, but I did. Can you believe it? I got a job offer from Windsor Hotels. You'd be so proud of me if you were here — I just know it! I wouldn't admit this to anyone but you, but they're the biggest and best company around. I'm nervous about telling Celeste.

Do you remember Zane Windsor from high school? Well, he's the one who owns the company. The hatred between Zane and Celeste is unfathomable, and it feels like I'm betraying her if I accept, even though she was the one who told me to apply. I think she

was just as hurt as I was when I received a rejection from Harrison Developments, you know? She looked devastated, and I just didn't know what to do, couldn't make it better. I'm worried she only told me to apply at WH because she felt guilty and knew it was my last option, but she doesn't actually want me working there.

How could she, Mom? Lane bullied her for years - really bullied her. I told you about it, didn't I? It wasn't mere teasing, he was relentless. Everything she did, he criticized, right down to her looks, like she could even help having braces. I hated him as much as she did, and part of me still does.

If you'd been there, you'd have wanted to hug Celeste tightly, like I did. I can't count the number of times I had to dry the tears he caused. So many times, I've come close to just slapping that smug smile off his face. How am I supposed to work for him now? I don't know what to do, Mom. I wish you were here to advise me.

My stomach knots, my discomfort caused by how eerily similar her feelings were to mine. I flick through, needing to know when that hatred

turned into more. What did I miss? How did I fail to notice my best friend falling for my boyfriend?

Dear Mom,

I'm sorry I haven't written to you in a while. The truth is I was ashamed to update you on my life, because I'm not sure how you'd feel about my actions lately. I'm not even sure how I feel about it myself.

Remember when I told you that Lane has been incredibly friendly and attentive at work? In that regard, nothing has changed. He still has me working on every project that he's personally on and he still mentors me himself, but... well, I don't know how to put this, to be honest, because it's something I find hard to believe myself.

Lane Windsor has been flirting with me ever since we started working on the Bellevue project together. It was gradual, and I can't exactly pinpoint when his behavior went from friendly to flirtatious. For a couple of weeks at the start of the project, he seemed oddly upset, angry even. I did my best to cheer him up, making the silliest jokes - just the way I would with Celeste. We quickly became friends,

and it wasn't meant to turn into more. But then one night, he seemed so incredibly sad that I offered to have dinner with him as a way to break up the endless work still ahead of us that evening. Perhaps it was then that everything changed.

I made him laugh, made him forget about whatever had upset him so much, and the way he looked at me changed. Now, when he says my name, there's a softness to it that's hard to ignore.

How could I go there, when this is the man that brought Celeste such torment, right? But he's changed, Mom. The man he is today? That man is irresistible. I think you'd like him if you met him today - it's like he's an entirely different person. He's so kind and thoughtful. Yesterday, he brought me flowers from his mother's observatory and asked me out on a lunch date. I said yes. I haven't told Celeste, though. I don't think I should. It would upset her, and I don't know... part of me wants to keep this version of him to myself. She wouldn't understand, and I don't want to have to defend myself. Is that wrong?

If you were here, would you tell me off! I promise you'd understand if you spoke to him, Mom.

I check the date, my stomach twisting violently. This was when we weren't speaking, after the blind date Mom arranged for me. In the time it took me to tell Lily about our kiss, he took her out on a date.

Dear Mom,

Today, Lane and I were both working late. He kept glancing over, making sure I was okay, and it was just adorable. He's so thoughtful. It's in the little things with him, like bringing me coffee when I have a lot of work to do and remembering how I take it. Staying late with me, even though he could easily work from home. We have lunch together almost every day now, and I really like him. I don't know what to do. Would it be okay to give in? I've never felt this way before. I think... I think this is happiness. This type of joy? It isn't something I've felt since you were taken from me, Mom. I'm so desperate for more of the way he makes me feel. If you were here, would you tell me to go for it? To chase after my own happiness for once?

A new kind of grief racks my body, sending a fresh wave of tears flowing from my eyes. This was when she started to tell me work kept her busy. It was just a few weeks before I bought my house, and I'd started to feel like we were growing apart. While I was falling for Zane, she was too.

Dear Mom,

I'm blushing just writing this, and I'm not sure if this is too much information to share with you, but I'd like to imagine that we'd have had more of a sisterly bond if you were still here with me. We would, wouldn't we?

You're the only one I can tell. Celeste would hate me if I admitted to this, but after today's meeting, Zane and I were the only ones left. He lingered, the most patient and kind smile on his face as I gathered all the meeting materials. Just before I could walk out, though, he grabbed my hand and pulled me against him.

Mom, the way he kissed me... I've never felt anything like it. My body just melted, and his touch was so all-encompassing. Is that even a word? I think it is. I'm falling in love, aren't I? I'm falling for my best

friend's enemy, and I don't know what to do about it. I don't think I can stop.

I begin to feel sick. They kissed in the time Zane and I weren't speaking? I spent all my time thinking about him, unsure whether to reach out, when he... I try my hardest to draw a full breath and fail, succumbing to the endless sobs that seem to rise from my broken heart. I almost want to stop reading, but I can't.

Dear Mom,

Celeste told me she kissed Zane. I was so stunned that I couldn't do anything but stare at her. At first, I thought she was joking, you know? The Zane I know never would've done that - we've been seeing each other for weeks.

I asked Celeste some more questions, and it sounded like that kiss happened quite some time ago. Before us. She seemed upset because they'd argued again afterward, and I told her to just talk it out with him.

I figured that he'd tell her what I can't - that it was a momentary lapse in judgment, an aftereffect of their rivalry. I hope she gets over it once she speaks to him. That look in her eyes when she spoke of him? It's what I see in the mirror every day.

Mom, I'm scared he was just using me to get over her. I think she was the reason he was so upset, the reason he sought me out at all. I was probably the closest thing to her he could get.

I bite down on my lip until I draw blood, my heart pounding wildly. I called him because she'd told me to, and when he came over, I... it was me who pulled him close. He told me he wanted to be mine, but he'd already been taken. Back then, I'd wondered if it was all a scheme. Was it?

Dear Mom,

I've picked up my pen to write this letter to you so many times, but each time, my words fail me. I came straight here from Celeste's house, and I'm honestly still processing what she told me.

Mom, she said she's dating Lane. How could that be possible?

I'm scared, because despite it all, I don't want to confront Lane. I don't want what we have to end, and if I say anything at all, it will. If given a choice between Celeste and me, any man would choose her. She's beautiful, smart, and so sweet. Mom, is it possible to love someone with all your heart but hate them too? I tried to warn her away, reminded her

of their past, but I'm worried it didn't help. I actually begged her not to fall for him, and I've never felt more pathetic.

I just don't understand. Lane stopped working overtime with me, probably because he's spending his evenings with Celeste now, but he still treats me with that kind of intimacy that makes me feel so special. We went on several work trips in recent weeks when he was supposedly already dating her, and the dates we've been on during those trips are endless - so many walks on the beach and romantic dinners, and then there's the way he'd call me into his room late at night...

Am I crazy for wanting to hold on to this happiness despite everything? Even if it's true, Celeste and Lane couldn't possibly last. Their families won't allow it. Perhaps this is just something she needs to get out of her system, and once she does, everything can go back to normal.

I hope it does.

I can't lose him, Mom, but I can't lose her either.

The page is marred by her tear stains, and they mingle with my own. I trace over Lily's words with my fingers, thinking back to that night. We'd been on the sofa, not having seen each other for several weeks. I told her everything, and she did beg me not to fall for him. She reminded me of every single reason it could never work, and I thought she'd merely been worried about me. I failed to see the signs. If I had, would she still be here with me today? Would I have walked away from Zane? Or would I have done what she did, and turned a blind eye?

I draw a shaky breath as I think back to the way Zane told me he hadn't slept with anyone but me. Just how many lies did he tell me? How far did his deception go?

Each of her letters is the same — Lily detailing her week and telling her mom how worried she is about Zane and me growing closer, how she can't bring herself to face me or ask about our relationship, because she doesn't want to know. All the while, nothing changed between Zane and her. Each time she writes about the flowers he gives her, it kills a little part of me. I always thought the flowers were just mine, something he never shared with anyone but me. It's odd how that stands out amongst everything.

Dear Mom,

Zane is increasingly growing more distant, and I know it's because of Celeste. I suspect he's trying to just let this thing between us fizzle out naturally, and I don't know how to stop it. I don't want to go back to being just friends with him, or even less than that. If he keeps this up, it'll be like nothing ever happened between us, which is probably what he wants — to forget what he did with his girlfriend's best friend for months.

I feel awful for wishing they'd end things soon. I need things to go back to the way it's supposed to be. He can't be happy with her, not truly, and he can't make Celeste as happy as she deserves to be.

Even if I wasn't in love with him, I wouldn't want her to be ridiculed by Zane's grandmother. I don't want her to feel the pain of not fitting in, not being accepted. I'm tempted to tell her everything, but she'd never forgive me. Eventually, reality will catch up on Celeste, and she'll realize that being with Zane means having to give up her company. Her grandfather would disown her if he found out.

They can't last, and the quicker they end things, the quicker she can move on and find her own person instead of hanging on to mine.

Is this my selfishness speaking? I can't tell anymore. I'm scared I'm losing him, and I'm getting tired of waiting. What do I do, Mom? I can't give up on him, but I can't bear the pain much longer.

It hurts to read about her torment, how despite her love for Zane, she didn't want to hurt me, didn't want to lose me. Would I have felt the same, had I known?

Mom,

It's over. I knew it the moment I walked into Celeste's parents' kitchen and found Zane standing there. I didn't think it'd ever happen, but her parents seem to have accepted their relationship. She looked so insanely happy, and it killed me to see it. I want that for her - I just wish it wasn't with the man I love more than life itself.

Zane didn't have to say anything for me to know we're done. He chose her, and he didn't even have the guts to tell me to my face. I don't think I can survive this, Mom. I wish you were here. More than anything, I just need a hug.

You know what hurts the most? Normally, I'd have gone to Celeste, and she'd have consoled me until the pain dulled. Now she's the only person in the world that can never find out about what I've done.

I begin to sob all over again, for everything I've lost, everything I unknowingly put Lily through. I wasn't there when she needed me, and if I had been, she might never have gone to that bridge at all. I let my eyes fall closed, nausea hitting me hard as every memory with Zane flashes through my mind, merging with everything I've just read. Each work trip he went on, each time he worked late, each mention of Lily. I never saw this coming

— he strung us both along, and I can't understand why. Was he messing with me when we first started dating, his attempts of seduction a smokescreen for his attempts to ruin Harrison Developments? Perhaps he never intended to fall for me, never meant to let things get this far.

Dear Mom,

I'll get to meet you soon — or so I hope, anyway. I've never really thought about heaven and hell. I always liked to imagine that you were still here with me, just in a different form. But you would've gone to heaven, wouldn't you? I don't think that's where I'm going, Mom.

I can't stay here any longer, can't be around Celeste. Every time I speak to her, she talks about Zane, and how they're working on getting their relationship accepted by their grandparents so they can get married.

Married.

She'd ask me to be her maid of honor, of course, and it'd destroy me. I can't watch him be happy with her, and it's making me crazy. It gives me thoughts I don't want to have, makes me wonder what I could do to make him see me again, and only me.

I can't be that person, can't be the one that steals away Celeste's happiness. I still love her so much, despite everything. I've never felt this much guilt and shame. Not even after what happened to you, Mom. That makes me a horrible person, doesn't it?

I know she'll never forgive me, but I have to tell her the truth before I come see you. If she marries Lane, she should do it knowing what kind of person he truly is. What if I wasn't the only one? What if there's someone else after me? I need her to know, but I won't be able to handle the fallout, the loss of our friendship. It's selfish, choosing to leave her and this world right after telling her everything, but I know I won't be able to handle her heartache, that look of betrayal.

I just hope that one day, Lane will know what it's like to be so blinded by love that you betray the ones closest to you for a mere glimpse of happiness, only to lose your soul in the process.

I hope Lane ends up paying for his sins, like I will.

That is my last wish.

*If there's a God in this universe of ours,
he'll grant that wish, won't he?*

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PART TWO

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The Present

Five Years Later

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Chapter Thirty-Six

ZANE

The gold embossed lettering on tonight's benefit dinner invitation glistens in the light, the name of Clifton Emerson's latest hotel taunting me. *The Calypso*. A soft huff escapes my lips as I hand the invite over at the entrance of the ballroom, unsure what I'm even doing here.

I rarely agree to attend any of these bullshit events — the only ones I tolerate are the ones my family host, and even those are a fucking waste of time. Every cent spent on these events should be donated, yet the donations won't come without this ruckus. Most of the people here wouldn't dream of contributing to anything but their own wealth if there wasn't anyone to see them do it. It's a charade, and it's one I want no part of — yet here I am.

My eyes roam over the crowd as a hint of unease creeps up my spine, The Herald's latest headline reverberating through my mind with each step I take.

"Mr. Windsor!"

I glance over to find one of my business associates walking toward me, and I groan silently. Yet another reason I avoid these events — they always make me feel like I'm surrounded by fucking vultures desperate for the mere chance to dig their claws into me. I smile politely, resigned to my fate, only to freeze at the sight of a similar silhouette.

My entire body freezes as everything else fades away until she's all I can see. She turns around, and my stomach clenches in a way it hasn't in

years. *Fuck*. It's almost as though time stills, like every part of my body is trying to delay the inevitable, even as I seek her out.

Celeste.

I warned her to stay the fuck out of my sight, and for years, she obeyed my command. For both her sake and mine, I'd hoped I wouldn't find her here tonight... yet there she is, standing right next to Clifton Emerson. She looks at him like he's all she can see, and that *smile*. That smile is the one that used to be mine. *Only mine*. Seeing her is like a punch to the gut, and I exhale shakily, rooted into place.

She's still every bit as beautiful. No — she's even more beautiful than she was in my memories. The way that long golden dress shimmers and clings to her curves is sinful, and though I try, I can't tear my eyes off her.

Celeste Harrison engaged to Clifton Emerson, The Herald's latest article read. I hadn't believed it, thought it was a baseless rumor despite the accompanying pictures. Fuck, I'm still unwilling to accept the truth, even as I stand here, watching that diamond sparkle around her finger.

Celeste frowns, and for a moment I'm convinced she must feel my gaze on her, because she lifts her head and searches the crowd. Her lips part in shock when our eyes meet, her arm slipping out of Clifton's. We both stand rooted in place, lost in each other's gaze, until she bites down on her lip and takes a step back, breaking the spell she had me under.

Celeste turns and flees the room, and I follow her, refusing to let her get away. My heart begins to race as she disappears around the corner, her heels clicking against the marble floors, leaving an echoing trail for me to follow. I smile humorlessly when I find her pressed up against the wall, the shock in her eyes mixed with deep-rooted hatred.

"Zane," she whispers, and fuck, hearing my name on her lips still fucking enralls me. It doesn't sound the way it used to. Even in high school, she never said my name with quite this much hatred, yet I love hearing it all the same.

"You know better than to run from me," I murmur as I take a leisurely step toward her, my eyes roaming over her body. Her chest is rising and falling rapidly, betraying how much my presence affects her. Celeste's eyes widen when I rest my forearms on either side of her head, caging her in against the wall.

Her hand moves to my chest, and for a moment, I'm certain she'll push me away, but instead, she merely rests her palm over my heart, the way she

used to. I clench my jaw and step closer to her until my body is pressed against hers. “I warned you, Celeste. Did you forget?”

She inhales sharply, and it takes all of me not to brush my lips against hers and steal her breath entirely. Five years, and she still captivates me the way she always has. It just makes me hate her more.

“You don’t scare me, Zane,” she whispers, the tremor in her voice contrasting with her words. “You won’t hurt me. If you were going to, you’d have done it already.”

I clench my jaw and move a hand into her hair, loving the feel of her thick curly hair. I fist my hand and grip tightly, my touch a silent warning. “I’m not the man you left behind, Celeste. Don’t provoke me.”

She exhales shakily and tips her head back to shoot me a look that blows straight past my defenses. “What if I do?” she asks, a wobbly smile dancing on her lips. She slowly drags her palm down. “What if I provoke you?”

My abs tense underneath her hand, and something flashes in her eyes — a hint of victory. “What do you think you’re doing, Celeste?” I ask, my voice coming out far more strained than I’d intended.

I groan when her fingers brush against my rock-hard cock, and she smirks. She’s fucking insane. “Just reminding you of what you lost. It’s why you keep attacking Harrison Developments, isn’t it? Because even after all these years, you can’t let go. How does it feel to know that I moved on? I’m happier with Clifton than I ever was with you, Zane. No amount of damage you do to my company will change that.”

Her words cut deep, and she fucking knows it. She’s aiming to kill, and fuck if I didn’t hand her the goddamn gun. I push my body against hers harder, trapping her hand between our bodies. The breath rushes from her lungs, and for a moment, there’s a hint of trepidation in her gaze. “I’ll make you regret appearing in front of me,” I warn, grabbing her hair to bring her face closer.

Celeste tilts her head as much as she can, bridging the remaining distance between us. “Do your worst,” she murmurs, her lips brushing against mine with every word. She knows exactly what she’s doing, how weak it makes me when she whispers against my lips like that.

“I showed you mercy once, Celeste. Never again,” I tell her, before sucking her bottom lip in between my teeth and biting down, wanting to

hurt her and finding myself entirely incapable of it. I don't know what I was thinking, assuming I could go near her without wanting her.

Celeste whimpers, and I tighten my grip on her hair before I take what should've belonged to me. I kiss her hard, devouring her, reminding her of what it was like to be *mine*, not giving a fuck that she's wearing someone else's ring. Her nails scrape over my scalp as she kisses me back, her body moving against mine with an equal amount of anger, hatred sizzling between us even as she locks her hands behind my neck.

I push my leg between her thighs and force her lips open, loving the way she still gives in so easily. Her tongue tangles with mine as I push my favorite peppermint candy into her mouth, and she takes it the way she used to, curling her tongue around it. *Fuck*. I still fucking love it when she does that, and something about it is so fucking maddening. It fucking infuriates me.

I tear my lips off her, both of us panting, the air instantly becoming charged with regret. I hadn't meant to kiss her, and the look in her eyes tells me she hadn't meant to kiss me back. "Walk down that aisle toward him, and it's the last you'll see of him," I threaten, my voice low, heavy with something I can't quite define. It isn't regret, nor is it longing. It's something right in between. "You don't get to be happy, Celeste. Not after what you did to me."

Chapter Thirty-Seven

CELESTE

The taste of menthol invades my senses as I walk back through the ballroom toward Clifton, Zane's words reverberating in my head with every step I take. I knew I'd have to face Zane when I decided to come back home, but nothing could've prepared me for what just happened. I didn't think that seeing him would hurt this much, nor did I expect to feel anything but hatred for him. I couldn't have been more wrong.

Cliff's hand wraps around mine the moment I'm within reach, and he pulls me against his chest, his arm wrapping around my waist possessively. "Where'd you go?" he asks, his tone tense.

His pained expression makes my heart wrench, and I stare into his eyes helplessly. "Powder room," I lie, my voice trembling.

His jaw locks as he lifts his gaze, and I don't have to follow his line of vision to know he must've just spotted Zane re-entering the ballroom. Cliff leans in and cups my face gently. "Is that why your lipstick is smeared?" He looks at me pleadingly, and my eyes widen a fraction when he gently swipes his thumb just below my bottom lip. "Tell me, Celeste, why do I smell mint on you?"

Every excuse dissolves on the tip of my tongue when he looks at me like that. "Cliff," I whisper.

"Do you know how I found out about the two of you all those years ago?" His thumb brushes over my lip now, like he's hoping to wipe away

every trace of Zane. “That same damn candy you’re sucking on right now. I’d offered you one at a conference we attended, and you declined, only to escape to the bathroom with Zane and come back crunching one between your teeth.” He pulls his hand away and looks down. “I was still holding the tin.”

My eyes widen as I think back to the way Zane pulled me into a utility closet, both of us so desperate for each other that we couldn’t even wait a few hours to get back to our room. I’d been so happy, so incredibly oblivious. I’ve gone over it a thousand times in my mind, unsure how I could’ve missed the signs. Was I blinded by the happiness I thought we’d found together, or was I simply ignoring every red flag because facing the truth was too hard? Even then, I knew that what we had was too good to be true, that it couldn’t last. The end just didn’t come in the way I’d expected.

“What is it going to take for you to look at me the way you still look at him? Did you think I wouldn’t notice the way you reacted when he walked into the room?”

“I’m sorry,” I tell him, my voice soft. “But you know exactly what this is and what it isn’t, Cliff. Our engagement is just business, and that won’t change. I’m grateful for your support and cherish our friendship, but I can’t... there’s nothing left of me to give to you.”

Cliff shakes his head and smiles. “Then I’ll just have to rob Zane Windsor of everything that no longer belongs to him.”

I wish it was that simple. The parts of me Cliff wants died alongside Lily. He sighs and takes a step away from me, a faux smile making its way onto his face as his gaze settles somewhere over my shoulder, and I turn to find my grandfather standing behind me.

“Forgive me, Clifton,” he says. “I’ll have to steal away my granddaughter.”

Grandpa offers me his hand, and I take it with a forced smile. The years I’ve been away haven’t been kind to him. The wrinkles on his face are deeper now, the look in his eyes entirely foreign. I’ve never seen him look so defeated, so tired, and it’s all because of me.

Grandpa pulls me toward the small dance floor at the edge of the dining area, where a live band is playing, but the music is lost on me. “You don’t have to do this, sweetheart. We both lost so many years already. I don’t know how many I have left, Celeste, but I don’t want to spend them knowing I’m the reason my granddaughter married the wrong man.”

“I’m not doing this for you,” I reassure him, my voice soft, emotionless. “This marriage is meant to benefit Harrison Developments, and ultimately, me as your successor. I’m the reason the company is this close to bankruptcy, so it’s only right that I fix it. He’s a good man, Grandpa. I think we’ll be happy together.”

“You never did explain how you went from looking at Zane Windsor like he hung the moon, to him systematically attacking our company until there wasn’t much left of it.”

My eyes snap to my grandfather’s, shock rendering me speechless for a moment. “I didn’t think you knew. Did Mom and Dad tell you?”

We’d been days away from asking for my grandfather’s blessing when Lily died, and all our plans fell to dust. He’d been so antagonistic to Zane that even Anne Windsor’s behavior toward me paled in comparison, but I never considered that he behaved the way he did because he *knew*. He just pretended not to, ignored the problem until it solved itself.

“You didn’t think I’d notice that Zane Windsor and all of his siblings suddenly started to treat me incredibly kindly? The man was trying to win me over, and he used every trick in the book. I never liked him, but I liked him even less when I realized he was after my only granddaughter. I’ve only ever seen tenaciousness like that in his rotten grandmother.”

I just stare at him for a moment, unsure what to say. “Celeste,” he says, sounding weary. “Don’t do what Anne and I did, and let resentment cloud your judgment. Whatever happened between you two can surely be left in the past, can it not? The company can survive, so long as Zane stops attacking us. We’ll rebuild without the Emersons.”

I shake my head. “It’s not that simple. He won’t stop, and neither will I.”

“He’s the reason you left?”

I look away, my mind drifting back to how I found him standing in front of my house in the rain, mere hours after I’d put him in jail. “*Run,*” he’d warned. “*Get the fuck out of my sight and don’t come back. Leave, and I’ll spare your family. Stay, and it’s your brother you’ll put behind bars next. The choice is yours.*” I’d forgotten who he was, what he’s capable of, and I found out the hard way.

“He’s the reason I left,” I admit. “But he’s also the reason I came back.”

Zane underestimated me, like he’s always done. I stayed away to protect my family, and he took my absence as an opportunity to dismantle Harrison

Developments, slowly leading us to the edge of bankruptcy. There's something brutal about the way he takes his time, bringing us down one well-orchestrated hit after the other. Each time, he allows us an opportunity to get up and recover, only to knock us to the ground harder than ever before. One more hit and the company is done.

He told me he wouldn't touch my family if I left quietly, but attacking Harrison Developments is no different — in the end, that still hurts my family, and he knows it. I should've expected this from him, should've known he wouldn't keep his word.

After all, that wasn't the first vow he broke.

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Chapter Thirty-Eight

ZANE

“What the fuck is this?” I ask, irritated when I find my brothers waiting in front of my house. I’m not sure why I even bothered asking when I know exactly what this is — it’s a fucking intervention, one I should’ve seen coming.

Lex tries his best to grin as he holds up the latest prototype of his portable poker table, his usual cheer notably absent. “I made some upgrades to the table’s design, so I thought we’d try it out.”

I stare at my brothers and take in their forced smiles, the worries they fail to hide. “Right,” I murmur, indulging them. “On a *Wednesday*, after a long day at work, when our official monthly poker night is scheduled three days from now?”

They exchange looks, their smiles wavering for a moment. “Why not?” Ares says, shrugging.

I sigh as I let them in. I should’ve expected this after the spectacle The Herald turned Celeste’s engagement news into. It’s been five years, and simply hearing her name fills me with barely containable rage. Even in the years we waged war against each other as children and then teenagers, I never hated her the way I do today — with every shattered piece of the heart that used to belong to her.

“Zane?” I look up to find my brothers seated at my dining table, Lex’s contraption placed on top. Luca straightens his back and holds up an

expensive bottle of whiskey. “Seemed like the night for it,” he says.

I try my hardest to smile for them and sit down just as Luca pushes a glass toward me. I knock it back, and he tops me up without words. Dion sighs as Ares begins to shuffle our bespoke deck of cards — courtesy of Sierra, who printed our faces on the joker cards when she found out we had a monthly get-together she wasn’t invited to.

“I’m thinking of calling this the Poke-It Poker Table,” Lex announces, breaking the heavy silence in the room. “Because you poke it, and it sets itself up.”

I stare at him blankly, and Luca rolls his eyes — a habit he picked up from Val, his wife. “No,” Ares says. “Absolutely not.”

Dion nods in agreement. “It was embarrassing enough The Herald found out about your dumb Lex-Board. You’re lucky they let you bribe them. Not that it helped, since they made it so obvious you paid them off in their retraction.”

A hush falls over the room at the mention of The Herald, and Dion’s eyes widen, remorse written all over his face. I take another sip of whiskey and place my glass down harder than intended. “I’m fine, you know? It’s been five years. I don’t give a fuck who she marries, so long as she stays the fuck away from me.”

My body recoils as the words leave my lips, my subconsciousness telling me it’s a lie. Out of everyone, why the fuck did it have to be Clifton? He’s the one Celeste’s mom envisioned her with before me. It hurts to know he’ll have Clara’s kind smiles and her weekly phone calls. Fuck, he’ll probably drink my whiskey with George and play cards with Archer. He’ll take Celeste to bed in the same room I used to sneak into, and he’ll be by her side in her parents’ kitchen on Saturday mornings. He’ll have everything that used to be mine, and they’ll welcome him with open arms.

“What happened between you two?” Lex asks, his voice pained. The memory of her still haunts him too — before Raven, Val, and Faye officially joined our family, she was the one he thought he’d have as his first sister-in-law. He loved her the way he loves all of our girls. My heart wasn’t the only one Celeste broke. Does she realize how much she’s hurt my family, how they’ve grieved the loss of her, of *us*?

I run a hand through my hair and look away. “We broke our vows, Lex. One after the other, until there was nothing left to hold on to.”

The boys exchange glances at my cryptic answer, our cards forgotten. “Was she the reason you were arrested?” Ares asks, his voice betraying his torment.

I’ve always refused to explain what happened, almost like a small part of me still wants to protect her, despite everything. That never stopped my brother from wondering, though.

Luca leans in and sighs. “Must have been,” he says to no one in particular. “But why?”

“Because she wanted me to understand what it’s like to lose everything I hold dear.” I smile humorlessly and shake my head, seeing the irony in it now, in hindsight.

I thought there was nothing we couldn’t withstand, but we came down like a house of cards. Lily’s death was the end of our relationship too. I didn’t see it, not straight away. Didn’t notice the way she’d linger in odd places of the house, the way her questions about my business became more pointed.

I didn’t put things together until the police showed up in front of my house with an arrest warrant, accusing me of corporate espionage and attempting to harm Harrison Developments. Celeste built a case that would’ve been impenetrable if I hadn’t been a Windsor. She’d been planning to put me behind bars, and all the while, I’d been planning to propose.

For years, I’ve wondered when her deception started, but each answer I find just results in more questions. Did she betray me because of Lily, or was it payback for the way I treated her when we were younger? Perhaps it was both, and I just failed to see the signs from the very start.

The moment Celeste realized I’d walked away scot-free following my arrest, she moved the rest of her chess pieces, leaking confidential information and causing Windsor Hotels such huge losses that my grandmother had to step in to salvage the situation. I still don’t understand why Grandma supported me without breathing a single word about it to my brothers, without even reprimanding me. I suppose she’d always seen it coming and had tried to warn me countless times. I should’ve heeded her words.

The sound of my front door slamming closed reverberates through the house, and I raise a brow as I look over my shoulder. “Zane? Are you home?” Sierra calls, moments before she walks in with Raven, Val, and

Faye in tow. The latter three all exchange looks with their husbands, and fuck, I don't have it in me to witness this tonight. This is what Celeste and I should've had together, what we *did* have.

Sierra holds up a shot glass and tries her best to grin, but her eyes are filled with the same pain I saw in Lexington's. "We brought our own glasses. I know we're not allowed to join your boys' night and whatever, but I have it on good authority that this isn't an official boys' night."

She slams her glass down on Lex's poker board, and I narrow my eyes. It reads *Anti-Poker Night*, with her name engraved underneath it. Val pulls a bottle of that strong Mexican stuff she likes out of her bag, and I groan. Every time we have that shit, I lose hours of my day to oblivion. "None of you have any respect for your work, do you?"

Val shrugs. "What's the point of being the boss if I can't take a day off?"

Luca grins, his eyes twinkling. "Good girl," he says, his voice gravely. Sierra rolls her eyes in obvious disgust, and I can't help but smile in response, genuinely, for the first time in days.

"Are you okay?" Raven asks, her voice soft.

I study her face, noting her distress. Raven and Sierra were so close to Celeste that her betrayal hit them nearly as hard as it hit me. They're the only ones other than Grandma who know what she did to me, and the fact they haven't spilled a word about it to the boys is something I'll always be grateful for.

"I'm okay, sweetheart," I promise her. "Are you?"

She sighs, her eyes meeting Ares's for a moment. "I'm not sure," she admits, and fuck, she might well be the only honest person in this room tonight.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

CELESTE

I stare at the engraving on Lily's marble headstone, my vision blurry. My lungs seize as I try to suck in a breath, and I end up choking on a sob, helplessness and grief suffocating me. I haven't been able to come here in years, not since her funeral, but time hasn't done anything to dull the pain. It still hurts as much as the day I was told they'd found her body.

In the days following Lily's death, I'd hidden away, reading her diary over and over again as divers tried their best to find her. I hadn't wanted to come out of her cabin, hadn't wanted to face reality. I knew that the moment I stepped out, I'd be stepping into a world that would be forever changed — a world without Lily in it, one where the man I loved more than anything wasn't who I thought he was.

My hands tremble as I kneel in front of Lily's grave and place the beautiful stargazer lilies I bought her on top, my eyes rapidly filling with tears. "I miss you," I whisper into the wind, my voice breaking. "God, I miss you so much. Not a single day has gone by without me thinking of you, Lily."

Most nights, I see her in my nightmares. I'll find myself standing on that bridge with her, and no matter what I do or say, I can't save her. The look on her face right before she spoke her final words haunts me, stealing away our best memories and replacing them with fragments of recurring dreams.

My fingers trace over her name, the cold marble bringing fresh tears to my eyes. “You were supposed to come work with me by now, and we’d rise to the top together. Instead, I lost you, and I’m barely surviving myself. This isn’t how our story was supposed to go.”

I pull my hand back and stare at the golden flakes on my nails, my engagement ring glittering in the sun. For years I’d dreamed of having a diamond ring on my finger, but now the sight of it just torments me. “I saw him,” I whisper, scared to even admit it. “Zane.”

The wind picks up, sending a chill down my spine. I wrap my arms around myself and draw a shaky breath, willing myself to stop crying. “I thought I’d feel nothing but the same blinding grief and hatred I felt five years ago, but seeing him again... it was nothing like that.”

Would it make Lily happy to know that he looked good? That power and intensity still drip off him the way it used to? Or would she despise him for not seeming tormented in the slightest? When he looked at me, there was no remorse in his eyes. All I saw was the same white-hot hatred that fuels me too.

I pause, feeling just as conflicted as I did five years ago. “Did you know, Lil? The first flowers Zane ever gave me were lilies. Ironical, isn’t it? Maybe it was a subconscious sign that I just missed, a way of telling me you were on his mind, even then.” The mere thought of it breaks my heart, and I let my eyes fall closed for a moment, feeling just as foolish as I did years ago.

“He’s still the same heartless jerk he’s always been,” I murmur, the words feeling strange on my lips, like they don’t ring true. “He threatened me. Zane doesn’t realize Archer is powerful enough to protect himself and our parents now. It took five years, but I’m finally in a position to undo the damage he did and inflict it on him in return. I won’t... I won’t leave your last wish unfulfilled, Lily.”

I never understood why she wrote letters to her mom, but I get it now. There’s so much I want to say to her, but I just don’t know how. “I wish you were here to tell me if I’m making the right choices,” I whisper. “Sometimes I wonder if you were able to find peace, and I’m terrified, you know? The thought of you leaving things unresolved and being unable to move on... it kills me, Lily. I don’t know what to do. I don’t know how to make it right, but I’m trying.”

What would she say if she saw me now? In the process of seeking justice for her, I seem to have lost my soul. Numbness has become a normal emotional response for me these days — I can't feel a thing for anyone but Zane. There's no excitement or joy in my life, and every fraction of happiness I feel is swiftly followed by guilt. Each time something happens that I would've wanted to share with her, my heart shatters all over again.

I bury a hand in my hair, only to be reminded of the way Zane pulled on it at the benefit dinner last month, his gaze sparkling with hatred. I've never seen him look at me that way, and it hurt more than I thought was possible.

My eyes fall closed as the memory replays in my mind, fresh waves of agony cascading over me. Being able to feel something again was thrilling, and for a few moments, I let myself get caught up in it.

It's odd how it's the little things that hit the hardest. It's the familiar scent of his custom blended cologne, and the way he still loves that same old peppermint candy. Being so close to him made my heart race the way it used to, made me want to drink him in even as every broken part of me longed to hurt him the way he's hurt me.

I raise my fingers to my lips, remembering the way he kissed me, every touch filled with unwanted yet uncontrollable desire. It felt inevitable, and it was far better than it was in my memories.

"Forgive me," I whisper, my stomach turning. I shouldn't have wanted him the way I did, shouldn't have given in to desire I shouldn't feel anymore. The mere taste of menthol brought every buried feeling to the surface, leaving me desperate for him. I hate myself for it — more than he'll ever know.

Chapter Forty

ZANE

Deep-rooted heartache spreads from my heart to every last nerve ending, and no amount of physical labor dulls it. Nothing distracts me from it.

I'm happier with Clifton than I ever was with you, Zane. Her fucking voice is in my head, taunting me every second of every fucking day, today more so than usual. That fucking bitch. I hate how beautiful she looked, how she felt against me, how she *tasted*. I hate every single thing about her, but what I hate most is the way I still want her.

She's insane if she thinks she'll marry Clifton. I'll bury him underneath my mother's precious roses before I let her walk down an aisle that has him waiting for her on the other end.

"I thought I might find you here."

I tense and turn around to find my grandmother leaning back against one of the pillars in my observatory. "Grams," I mutter, surprised to find her here.

She smiles so sweetly that she'd deceive any outsider into thinking she's an innocent, sweet grandmother, instead of the titan she is. Even her light pink suit seems surprisingly cute. Grandma holds up a picnic basket and tilts her head. "I baked you cookies and brought some other things too. Will you eat with me?"

I sigh as I begin to pull off my gardening gloves, silently wishing for peace and quiet to just... seethe in silence. I haven't been this angry in

years, haven't felt this fucking unhinged. I can't tell if I want to destroy Celeste or just fuck her into oblivion. Both, perhaps.

"I'd love to," I murmur, my monotone voice betraying my reluctance.

Grandma chuckles as she pulls a blanket out of her basket and lays it down beside Mom's roses, her expression suspiciously serene. "Come sit."

I do as she asks, knowing better than to deny my grandmother anything while she's still asking nicely. "To what do I owe this pleasure?"

I tried to sound a little more pleasant, but the look she throws my way tells me I failed. "Can't I just have lunch with my grandson?"

I narrow my eyes as I fold my legs underneath me, grateful I'm wearing workout gear today. First, the boys staged a fucking intervention, and now my grandmother? Just how obvious have I made it that I'm affected by Celeste's engagement?

Grandma hands me a cookie and I stare at it, remembering the moment I realized my sister and Celeste had become friends. We'd been at my house, and Sierra walked in with a Tupperware box filled with cookies. Normally, she'd come in just to gloat and wave them in my face before leaving again, but this time, she sat Celeste down, made her a cup of tea, and offered her a cookie.

I'd never seen anything like it before. Sierra practically engages in guerrilla warfare to get her hands on these cookies, yet there she was, handing one to Celeste, an eager expression on her face, like she'd hoped Celeste would love them as much as she does. I didn't have the heart to tell her Celeste doesn't like sweets of any kind.

"One day, Grandma will make them for you too," she promised, her gaze reassuring. *"When she does, I'll absolutely fight you for them... but until then, you can have mine."*

"Zane?"

I blink in surprise to find Grandma staring at me, a hint of concern in her gaze. "Thanks," I murmur belatedly, before biting off a chunk, the bitterness in my body rendering it completely tasteless.

"What's going on with you, sweetheart? What are you doing here on a weekday? Why aren't you at work?"

Because everywhere I go, I'm reminded of the past. I can't go to the office without thinking of Lily, and I can't be in my house without thinking of Celeste. I renovated my entire home when we broke up, and that still wasn't enough to erase her.

“Just needed a day off,” I murmur. “I had a headache, so I thought it’d be good to spend some time here.”

Grandma raises a brow. “A headache?” she repeats, her voice dripping with disbelief. “Is that what we’re calling Celeste Harrison these days? Quite apt, I suppose.”

My head snaps up at the mention of her, but my grandmother merely grins and continues to unpack the variety of cheeses and crackers she brought, acting like nothing is amiss as she holds up a thermos. “Would you like some tea?”

I nod demurely, unsure what else to do. What is she even doing here? Something about her gaze makes me feel unsettled — she does this sometimes, makes me feel like a pawn in an elaborate game I don’t know the rules of.

She hands me a delicate porcelain cup, the Windsor crest on it in real gold. “Zane,” she says, her tone serious. My entire body tenses at the sight of that unwavering stern look in her eyes, a hint of unease running down my spine. “I would like you to stop attacking Harrison Developments. I let you do it for years because I don’t particularly like Ed Harrison, and it seemed cathartic for you. I’m starting to think that’s no longer the case.”

“I won’t,” I tell her, my tone rough. I didn’t think she’d even realized what I was up to, but I should’ve known better. There’s a lot she ignores, but there isn’t much she misses.

Grandma smiles kindly, deceptively. “Did it sound like I was asking? I’m not.”

I stare at my grandmother, trying to get a read on her and coming up empty. “*Why?*” My voice sounds harsher than I intended, betraying my torment.

She grins, and for a moment, she looks just like Sierra. “Because Ed and I came to an agreement.”

Dread settles in the pit of my stomach. “*What?*”

She reaches over and pats my hand. “Zane, your anger is merely a thin veil that attempts to obscure your pain, despite its sheer nature. It’s time to take a step forward, toward happiness. You need to move on and let the past be just that — the past.”

Move on? Like Celeste thinks she’ll do with Clifton? Is that what this is? Did Ed forsake his pride to ask for a ceasefire on his granddaughter’s behalf? A wedding present, perhaps?

“What did he offer you?” I ask, anger manifesting in my voice.

Grandma takes a sip of her tea, leaving me in suspense as her eyes roam over my face. “He offered to return something precious to me, something I’d lost.”

I tighten my grip on my cup, my anger boiling over. “What could possibly be so precious that you’d make a deal with the devil?”

She smiles, but this time, it doesn’t reach her eyes. “You.”

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Chapter Forty-One

ZANE

My grip on my phone tightens as I read The Herald's latest headline, my stomach turning in distaste. *Wedding Of The Century*, they captioned their article about Celeste's wedding plans.

Thankfully, we've been able to keep news about her out of every media outlet that Windsor Media has a stake in, but the Herald is hard to silence. Every attempt to acquire them has failed, and they seem to take great joy in covering Celeste's upcoming wedding. Fucking cockroaches. Week after week, they publish something else about her, and like the sucker I am, I can't stop reading that tripe.

I sigh as I walk into my grandmother's house for our weekly dinner, feeling uneasy. Ever since Grandma asked me to stop attacking the Harrisons a few weeks ago, I've been on edge. I hate not knowing what's going on in her mind, what she's plotting. She's been awfully quiet in recent weeks, and that never bodes well for any of us.

The dining room is buzzing when I walk in, and I glance around to find Ares sitting with Raven, Luca with Val, and Dion with Faye. All three couples look so happy together, and fuck, normally I love seeing the happiness on their faces. Today it just reminds me of everything I lost.

"You okay?" Sierra asks, walking up to me with Lex in tow. I nod, and she rubs my arm before sitting down and instantly stealing Raven's attention from Ares, earning a glare from our eldest brother.

“Seriously, are you okay?” Lex asks as he takes a seat next to me. “I saw the articles. The Herald is literally covering every detail they can dig up about Celeste, right down to the wedding dress they think she’ll wear. It’s fucking insane. I’m surprised they never found out about you two.”

I nod absentmindedly. Back then, The Herald wasn’t what it is today. They wouldn’t have had the resources to spy on us the way they do now. For one sickening moment, I wonder what Clifton’s expression would be if he found out I dated her, that I’m the first man she’s ever been with.

“I’m fine. I don’t give a fuck about her or her wedding plans,” I tell him, even though I sabotaged every single thing The Herald reported on, right down to her wedding venue. They’d planned to get married at one of the Emerson hotels, and I got the entire place shut down on a building code violation that probably doesn’t even exist. It’ll take them a while to wade through the paperwork — long enough for them to have to move the entire wedding.

The closer the date gets, the more restless I become. I was sure she’d heed my warning, but it looks like she’s forging ahead and forcing my hand. She must think I’m the same person she left behind, the one who had a weak spot for her. She’s about to find out the hard way that I meant it when I told her I’d destroy her if she ever appeared in front of me again.

“Kids!” Grandma calls as she walks in, her cheeks rosy, as though she’d been rushing to get here. I frown when she grabs an empty wine glass and swipes a spoon off the table. “*Kids!*” she repeats, tapping 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 Ares, Luca, and Dion before settling on me. *Fuck*. She can’t be serious. This can’t be what I think it is. “Zane,” she says, and my heart drops. “Dion has been happily married for quite some time now, and it’s about time you follow in Ares, Luca, and Dion’s footsteps.”

I stare at her in disbelief. I’d known I’d be next, but somehow, I thought I’d have more time. I’m not ready — I’m not sure I ever will be. Marriage isn’t something I’d ever dare fuck around with. If there’s anything my parents taught me, it’s that marriage is sacred. How am I supposed to devote myself to my wife when I can’t stop thinking about destroying Celeste

fucking Harrison for more than a day or two? If I ever get married, I want my wife to be the only one I have any kind of strong feelings for.

Grandma smiles, and I raise my wine glass to my lips, emptying it before slamming it back down on the table, resigned to my fate. Maybe this is exactly what will finally force me to let go of the resentment that threatens to consume me every fucking waking moment. Maybe it's time I shift my focus and try my hardest to move on like Celeste has. "Honestly, Grandma? I really don't give a damn who I marry," I lie, knowing this is inevitable. "You do you."

She nods sharply and grins. "Excellent. You'll be marrying Celeste Harrison three weeks from now."

My entire body stills as the words wash over me without truly registering. One beat passes, and then another, my mind replaying her announcement as confusion slowly makes way for shock.

"Last I checked, Celeste was engaged to someone else," Dion says, his tone cautious.

I rise to my feet in a rush, my ears ringing. "I won't marry her," I tell Grandma, feeling sick to my stomach. "Anyone but her."

Grandma crosses her arms and stares me down. Gone is the sweet grandmother she portrayed in my observatory last month. In her place stands the woman who built the empire we now own, the woman who won't take no for an answer. "You once begged me to marry her, didn't you? 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."

I stumble back, unable to comprehend what she's telling me. She can't expect me to *marry* Celeste. Not after everything she put me through. I take another step back before turning and walking out, my mind reeling. Grandma was the one who bailed me out, the one who made all the evidence Celeste planted disappear. She knows better than anyone what Celeste is capable of, so why?

Two sets of footsteps resound behind me, and I don't have to look back to know it's Sierra and Lexington. "Zane!" Sierra calls, but I don't slow my pace until I'm outside and halfway down the walkway to my house.

"Zane," Lex repeats, his tone much calmer than hers had been, but not any less concerned.

I turn around, unable to suppress my anger. "Not her," I snap. "I can't marry her. I'll fucking murder her if she doesn't stab me in the back all over

again first.”

Sierra looks at me with such pity in her eyes that I can’t hold her gaze. I run a hand through my hair and stare up at the sky instead, unable to get my thoughts under control. “I hate her with all I am,” I whisper, my eyes closed.

“No,” Lex says, his voice soft. “You don’t. And that’s the problem, isn’t it?”

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Chapter Forty-Two

CELESTE

My heart aches as I swipe through the different wedding cake designs Clifton sent me, my mind involuntarily drifting back to the vision board I set on fire five years ago. Zane and I spent hours flicking through wedding magazines on the sofa, and at the time I'd thought our dreams were aligned. When he told me he'd propose as soon as we had our family's approval, I believed him.

How much time did we spend debating back and forth about the tiniest details, envisioning the wedding of our dreams? How many cake designs did we look at back then? It was our way of focusing on the future and everything we were looking forward to. Or so I'd thought.

I still remember the one we ended up choosing, and for one single moment, I'm tempted to order it, even if it's just so I can imagine the look on Zane's face when *The Herald* inevitably publishes a photo of Cliff and me cutting the cake. My need to hurt Zane is insatiable and all-consuming.

My phone buzzes again just as I walk into my parents' house for dinner, and my stomach turns when I open another one of Cliff's messages, this one filled with honeymoon destinations. In return for his financial help, he asked me to make our marriage look real, and this is part of it. Rationally, I know that, but at the same time I can't help but worry that he hopes a romantic honeymoon will turn our friendship into something more, something I warned him I couldn't give him.

“Celeste?” Mom calls.

I look up to find my family seated in the living room, and then I do a double take, realizing that they’re *all* here — Mom, Dad, Grandpa, and *Archer*. I haven’t seen the latter two in the same room in years, and the fact they are seems ominous. My heart instantly beats a little faster, a sense of unease washing over me.

“Come sit,” Dad says, his tone terse and his expression conflicted.

I hesitate for a second before doing as he asks and sitting down next to Archer. “What’s going on?” I ask, nervous. “What happened?”

Grandpa smiles at me, and it only makes me more certain that something is wrong. He’s changed in the years I was away, but that calculating glint in his eyes is still the same. He trusted me to run the company remotely, and over the years, he’s fully handed over the reins, but he’ll never step back completely. “I’ve come to a business agreement that will not only restore Harrison Developments to its former glory, it’ll elevate it further,” he says, sounding pleased.

I stare at him long and hard, searching his words for hidden truths. “How? There’s nothing I haven’t tried, no avenues I left unexplored. Clifton’s extensive help will allow us to survive, but not even that is enough to undo the damage that’s been done.”

I spent years combatting Zane’s attacks behind the scenes and figuring out our countermoves. There’s no scenario I haven’t thought of, nor is there a better way to execute the plans I have in mind.

Dad nods, his gaze fixed on the trees outside our window. “Right idea, poor execution,” he mutters, his voice filled with something that can only be described as anger mixed with frustration. I raise a brow, trying my hardest not to take offense.

For weeks now, Dad has been trying to change my mind about marrying Cliff. Each time I ask him why he’s so adamant that I shouldn’t be with Clifton, he just looks at me and shakes his head, regret marring his features.

My grandfather crosses his arms and sighs, looking weary. “Celeste, I’m merging the company with Windsor Hotels.”

I stare at him as I try to decipher his words, certain they can’t mean what he thinks they do. “That’s impossible,” I whisper, my voice breaking as panic grips me hard and fast. They’re the reason we’re in this state in the first place.

“Anne and I came to an agreement. Surely you’ve noticed the attacks have stopped?”

I take a steadying breath, my stomach churning. The attacks haven’t *stopped* — Zane merely moved his attention from ruining the company to ruining my wedding. As usual, there’s no clear evidence of it, but I’m certain he’s behind all the mishaps we’re experiencing. Our venue had to be changed twice, and both wedding dress designers I wanted to work with were suddenly booked up for months, among a slew of other problems.

Archer wraps his arm around me and squeezes tightly, his gaze filled with trepidation. “There’s more,” he says, his voice soft. He glances at Mom then, and the way she nods at him and straightens her spine sends a chill down mine.

“The merger comes with a few stipulations. One of them is an arranged marriage between our families,” Mom says, her tone firm.

“No,” I instantly reply, my breathing rapidly becoming more shallow as panic seizes me. They can’t... this can’t be... this cannot be happening to me.

“You’ll have to marry Zane,” Dad adds, not sounding even remotely sympathetic. “The wedding date has been set.”

I rise to my feet, my mind buzzing. “I won’t. There isn’t much I won’t do to save the company, but not this. There’s a lot I never told you about the reasons we broke up, but trust me when I tell you there’s no coming back from what happened. If this is some misguided attempt at pushing me toward happiness, please stop. I won’t find it with him.”

I should’ve told them everything. In the first few weeks after Lily died, I wasn’t able to talk about her at all, couldn’t comprehend everything that happened. Those weeks went by in a blur. Focusing on fulfilling her last wish was the only thing that got me out of bed most days, and Zane undoing every carefully orchestrated step so easily robbed me of the vindication I was sure I’d feel. I’ve spent years wondering how to still make Lily’s last wish come true, only to find him thwarting my plans yet again.

Grandpa sighs. “You won’t find happiness with Clifton Emerson, either. If you’re going to be unhappy in your marriage, you might as well be unhappy in a marriage that benefits us. The Emersons can’t help us the way the Windsors can. You know what it means to merge with them, don’t you? Stop running away from your problems, Celeste. If not for you, we wouldn’t be in this position at all, so take responsibility and fix this mess.”

I wrap my arms around myself and look out the window, unsure how to refute my grandfather's words. "I might be to blame, but you're the one handing our company over to the one person who wants to see it destroyed above all else. He won't save us, Grandpa. Zane will usurp us, finishing what he started. If you do this, we're done for."

He smiles at me, his expression unwavering. "You'll find that Anne Windsor is perfectly capable of keeping her grandchildren in line. This union will achieve what Emerson never could. It's time to leave the past where it belongs, Celeste. The Harrisons and Windsors are stronger together, and it's time we acknowledge that."

I glance at Archer for support, certain he'd be on my side, but he merely studies me with an unreadable expression on his face. "If you truly still want to hurt him, why not do it from the position closest to him, as his wife?"

I glance at my brother, my heart heavy. "I can't marry him," I whisper, my voice breaking. I told Lily I wouldn't — it's one of the last things I ever said to her.

"You either marry him, or I'll declare bankruptcy and let my entire life's work vanish into dust. You'll have to live with knowing that you not only caused our downfall, but you could've prevented it too," Grandpa snaps. "You have three days to decide."

Chapter Forty-Three

CELESTE

Anne Windsor smiles as her butler leads me into her living room, catching me entirely off-guard. I've only ever seen her smile at me once, right before she realized who I was, and every hint of warmth drained away, leaving nothing but the deep-rooted resentment that she has regarded me with ever since.

"I'm surprised you agreed to meet with me," I say, my tone harsher than I'd intended. "I distinctly recall being banned from all Windsor properties."

She gestures to the sofa opposite the one she's seated on and crosses her ankles, looking as regal as her surname denotes, her black pantsuit only adding to the power she emanates. "That never stopped you before, did it?" she says, her eyes sparkling with amusement that I most definitely don't share.

"It should have," I tell her, my spine rigid as I take a seat, mirroring her posture. "You were right about me back then, and it would be unwise to change your mind now. If I marry your grandson, I'll happily ruin us both. If we end up married, I'll set his house on fire while we both sleep, and I'll do it without an ounce of remorse."

She tilts her head, and then she laughs, the sound rich and melodious, genuine delight in her gaze. Her reaction is so unexpected I find myself staring at her, startled and entirely unsure how to proceed. I'd thought threatening her grandson would infuriate her, that it'd bring forth every

protective instinct in her, but she merely looks at me like she finds me endearing.

“Set fire to anything you please,” she tells me, her tone indulgent. “We have excellent security systems, so our men will get you out before any harm is done to either of you. Zane’s house does lack character these days. I’ve often wanted to take a torch to it myself. Burn down the house if you’d like, Celeste. We’ll just rebuild it.” She pauses then, her expression softening. “And call me Grandma. We’ll be family soon, after all.”

I blink in shock, her words rendering me speechless for a moment. “I... I’ll smother him in his sleep,” I stammer, my entire body blazing with anger and helplessness, my control over the situation slipping between my fingers.

She clears her throat, and the way her eyes widen makes me think she’s finally hearing me. “I’m not sure it’s appropriate to tell me about my grandson’s sexual preferences,” she says, her tone light.

“*Enough.* Both of you.” My entire body freezes at the sound of Zane’s voice. I don’t have to turn around to know what I’ll find. I’ve committed every single thing about him to memory, so much so that I recognize his footsteps as he walks into the room. “If I couldn’t change my grandmother’s mind, you certainly won’t.”

I rise to my feet, my heart hammering in my chest as I take in his wrinkled white shirt, and the way he’s rolled up his sleeves. “Was this you?” I ask, trying my hardest to stay calm. “Is this an attempt to break Clifton and me up?” Something familiar crosses his face — possessiveness mixed with jealousy, and it does something to me, makes me want to hurt him a little more, cut a little deeper.

He clenches his jaw and crosses the room in a few swift steps. His hand wraps around my wrist, and he pulls me into him harshly, startling me. My body crashes against his, and I stare up at him with pure unbridled hatred coursing through me, coating me in malice. “Let’s have a chat, shall we?” he demands, dragging me along and out of the room.

I try to pull my wrist out of his grip when we reach the hallway, and he looks over his shoulder, his expression hard. “Don’t make me throw you over my fucking shoulder, Celeste,” he warns, his voice low, threatening. “*Walk*, or I’ll carry you.”

My lips part, but my words are lodged in my throat. I have no doubt my cheeks are flushed, betraying how flustered he’s made me feel. Zane’s

shoulders relax just a little when he realizes I won't fight him, and I'm instantly tempted to agitate him. If I do, would he carry me the way he used to?

We're both quiet as we walk through the elaborate gardens that connect all the Windsor properties. I thought he'd lead me to his house, but he pauses at what I can only assume is the property line, the observatory looming behind him.

He pushes my wrist away then, letting go of me. The distaste in his eyes only fuels my anger further. "Neither of us is getting out of this," he says, his tone defeated. "I've tried everything, Celeste. If there was a way out, I'd have found it."

Zane runs a hand through his thick dark hair, the strands a little longer than before. The movement is so deceptively familiar, and so vastly in contrast to the hatred in his eyes. "Once upon a time, I'd have walked away from my inheritance for you — not anymore. If I have to marry you to get my Windsor Hotels shares, I will." He stares at me for a moment, and I can't help but wonder what he sees.

"I cannot marry you," I tell him, my voice breaking.

He smiles and takes a step toward me, his expression unreadable as he wraps his hand around the back of my neck, his thumb resting on my throat. My heart instantly begins to race. "Yeah?" he murmurs, sounding entirely too gleeful for a man whose fate is as forsaken as mine. "Can you afford to walk away from an opportunity to merge with Windsor Hotels for Emerson?" He chuckles, but his amusement is notably absent from his eyes. Zane tightens his grip on the back of my neck, his touch possessive as he steps into me.

"*Please*," I whisper, unable to articulate my torment. He's the one man I can't marry, the one person I can't be with. I've failed Lily enough throughout the years, but this is the one thing I know she'd never forgive.

Zane's gaze heats as he pulls me closer, my body brushing against his. "I've always loved the way you beg," he whispers, tilting his face toward mine, his eyes roaming over my face and settling on my lips. "Do you beg for him like that? Did you beg him to save you, only to realize you can never escape me?"

My hands find their way to his chest with every intention of pushing him away, but the moment I touch him, my resolve wavers. "You don't

want to marry me,” I warn him, my voice soft, filled with promises he won’t want me to keep. “I’ll turn your days into a living hell.”

He grins and squeezes the back of my neck, bringing me closer until my hands are trapped between us. “You already do, Celeste. Except this way, I get to drag you down with me. I don’t want to make you my wife, but I’ll enjoy every second of it. I’ll make you regret the day you crossed me. Every day of torment you caused me, I’ll return a thousand times over.”

He’s so close that the air between us fills with the fresh smell of menthol, and I suck in a breath, my entire body responding to him. “I won’t give up on Cliff,” I warn him, my need to hurt him overwhelming my senses. “I won’t stop seeing him, Zane. Even if I marry you, he’s the only one I’ll love, the only one I’ll *touch*.”

His entire body goes rigid, pure fury blazing in his eyes as he tightens his grip on my neck. “You have no idea what you’re getting into, do you?” he asks, moving his hand up, until it’s my hair he’s wrapping his fingers into. Something dark sparkles in his gaze, a silent warning of the words to come. “There are several rules to a Windsor arranged marriage.”

I frown, and Zane grins as he wraps his free hand around my waist, holding me in place. “Rule number one: no cheating. If either of us cheats, we both lose everything. Our grandparents will sell our shares out from under us and disown us. Go anywhere near Clifton, and you’ll lose everything you fought so hard to save.”

My eyes widen in shock, and he smiles humorlessly, his gaze victorious. “Rule number two: we can’t spend more than three consecutive days apart, which means we can’t turn this into a paper marriage whereby we never see each other. If the contract our grandparents enforce is the same as the ones Ares, Luca, and Dion signed, then we can’t be apart for more than a couple of days per year in total.”

For a moment, I wonder if he’s messing with me, but the look in his eyes tells me he’s serious. Zane grins as he leans in, his lips brushing against my ear. “Rule number three,” he whispers, his hot breath sending a shiver down my spine. “We’ll share a bed every single night.”

Zane turns his face, his teeth grazing over my ear, and I bite down on my lip as he pulls away to look at me, my face flaming. “I don’t even want to look at you, let alone marry you,” he tells me, seemingly unaffected. “But I’m with left no choice, so I’ll do what I must. I highly recommend

that you do the same. You've cost me plenty throughout the years — you won't cost me my company too."

I push against his chest, and he lets go of me with a vicious smile on his face. "I'll find a way out," I tell him, breathing hard. "I won't marry you."

He crosses his arms and studies me for a moment. "Once you realize there's no way out, come find me, Celeste. We'll discuss how to survive this bullshit."

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Chapter Forty-Four

CELESTE

“Please don’t do this,” Cliff pleads over speakerphone, for the hundredth time in the last couple of days. “We should just elope.”

“If that was a solution, I’d jump on it,” I murmur as I drive up to large gates I know all too well. They swing open automatically, and I frown in surprise. Was it Zane who registered my number plate, or was it his grandmother? Unease runs down my spine at the thought of either of them having such easy access to information about me. I’ve only had this car for a few days, yet it’s clearly in their systems.

“I don’t think your grandfather will actually declare bankruptcy if we elope. I’m not sure what he’s thinking but—”

“He will,” I interrupt. “He already has his lawyers on standby for the filing.” I just don’t understand why — why would he rather join hands with the Windsors than accept Cliff’s help? It’s true the Emersons can’t do as much for us as the Windsors can, but given enough time, I can rebuild everything we’ve lost. If Zane truly stopped undermining my efforts, I could. I just don’t understand why he’d want to join hands with the people who put us in this position in the first place. Why them? Why now?

Déjà vu hits me hard as I navigate the roads inside the Windsor mansion effortlessly. I hadn’t been thinking about it consciously, yet somehow, I find myself pulling up to Zane’s house. It still feels so natural — it still feels like *home*.

“Celeste,” Clifton says as I park my car in the same spot that used to be mine. “I don’t have to say it for you to know this wasn’t just a business deal to me. In the last couple of years, you’ve come to mean more to me than you could possibly know. I want this with you, even if it’s one-sided, even if the chances of you ever feeling the same are virtually non-existent.”

I lean back in my seat, my heart heavy. “I’m sorry,” I tell him, meaning every word, even as my gaze roams over Zane’s front door and his unchanged lawn, an unwanted hint of longing settling deep in my chest. “To be honest, Cliff... I’d also hoped we could make it work. If there’s anyone I’d want to love, it’s you.” I push my hair behind my ear and draw a shaky breath, steeling myself. “But ultimately, our marriage was about saving Harrison Developments, and whether I like it or not, Windsor Hotels could do for us what no one else can.”

To say I feel conflicted about marrying Zane would be putting it mildly. I have no doubt it’ll be hell — there’s too much history between us, too much hatred, and far too much that was left unresolved. This union might benefit our families, but it will destroy me. If I’m lucky, it’ll ruin him too.

“Is there anything I can do to change your mind?”

I watch through my windshield as Zane’s front door opens, and he leans against the doorway, dressed in an impeccable three-piece suit. He looks more dangerous than ever before, his expression entirely unreadable as he watches me.

“No,” I answer, tearing my eyes off Zane. “I really am sorry, Cliff. If we could... I’d like to stay friends if that’s something you’d be interested in. I know this is... it’s not what either of us wanted.”

He sighs. “If that’s the only way I get to keep you in my life, I’ll take it. I’ll take whatever you’re willing to give me, Celeste.”

I draw a shaky breath and grab my phone, looking down at it with a heavy heart. “I need to go, but I’ll speak to you later, okay?”

He hums in agreement, and I end the call before taking a moment to gather my courage. All the while, Zane just stands by his door, his posture relaxed and his eyes on me. Looking at him hurts, and I hate that it isn’t the same for him. He’s angry about everything I’ve done to him, but he’s not hurting like I am. I’m sure he isn’t struggling to sleep at night like I am. He’s not haunted by the past, the mistakes we both made, the pain we caused.

I'm trembling as I step out of the car and try my hardest not to show it. If he notices it, he doesn't let on. Zane merely raises a brow as I walk up to him, the smooth stones underneath my heels reminding me of the first time I came here.

"I see you've come to a decision."

I nod, and he steps aside to let me into his home. My eyes widen as I take in the unfamiliar interior. He didn't just erase everything we built, he obliterated it. The entire layout of his house seems to have changed to create far more open spaces than there used to be, and the color scheme is vastly different. Gone are all the shades of emerald we chose together, replaced by a monochrome black and white with some dashes of a masculine mahogany hue.

Zane leads me to his living room and gestures at his dark brown leather sofa, the contrast stark. I used to love his white fabric sofa — it was nearly identical to mine, and we spent so many nights on it, trying to watch a movie only to find ourselves wrapped up in each other halfway through.

He sits down opposite me in a matching armchair. "What did you decide?" His voice is different from what I'm used to. He sounds professional and distant, and somehow, it just makes my heart ache. He's never treated me this way before, and somehow, I find that I prefer his hatred over this level of indifference.

"You act like I genuinely had a choice."

He sighs. "We'll need a comprehensive set of rules." He reaches for a black folder on his coffee table and hands it to me, clearly well-prepared for my visit. It just makes me feel all the more helpless. "We only need to remain married for three years. After that, we can divorce without losing our individual shares. Considering that this is a merger, it won't be possible to avoid each other completely afterward, but it's something."

I nod as I flick through the documents, making a mental note to have my lawyer go through this on my behalf. "That seems reasonable." Three years... it sounds long, but it'll fly by. It's a small sacrifice to make, and deep down, I think it's something Lily would forgive me for. She wouldn't want me to walk away from an opportunity to save Harrison Developments, would she?

"We will have to abide by my grandmother's rules in that time, which includes both of us having to live on the Windsor Estate. There is no getting out of it, and I don't recommend that we try. There are, however, some

additional house rules I'd like to discuss." I raise a brow, waiting for him to elaborate. Zane pulls on his tie to loosen it and looks away. "The observatory and my home office are off-limits. You're free to use anything else, but those two places will remain locked and off-limits to you."

I draw a shaky breath, remembering how he once said he'd gift the observatory to his wife. I suppose it's something he's saving for someone else. Is there already someone he's got in mind? Will he marry me only to count down the days until he's free to be with her? The thought doesn't sit well with me.

"I'd also like you to stay out of my private affairs, and as much as you can, I want you to stay away from my family. Three years from now, I want a clean break. If I hadn't kept messing with Harrison Developments, we wouldn't be in this situation now. It's time I let go of the old resentment that held me in its clutches." He looks at me then and sighs. "Truthfully, you're not worth it."

I flinch, and something dark unfurls in my stomach — a deep need, a desire to inflict the same pain I'm feeling. "What private affairs? This document states that infidelity is expressly forbidden. That doesn't mean *not getting caught*, Zane. It means not straying at all." My mind drifts back to Lily's diary, and pain tears through my chest at the thought of missing the signs all over again, of there being someone else when I'm the one he'll call his wife.

He inhales deeply and pinches the bridge of his nose. "My patience is limited," he warns. "You know full well that it means I don't want you to be part of my life any more than you need to be. I don't want you around my friends and my siblings, don't want you anywhere near me unless you absolutely have to be. Clear?"

I nod and try my hardest to ignore the sting of rejection. "I'm glad we're on the same page. In return, I want your promise that you truly will do everything in your power to restore Harrison Developments to what it was, even if it'll have a new name. All the employees we lost, our properties, everything."

"I can do that." He hesitates then, distaste flashing across his face. "This is perhaps too much to ask of someone like you, but my siblings are incredibly worried about me. Try not to do anything that'll make them worry further."

My heart twists at the thought of his brothers, Sierra, and Raven. I've hurt them so deeply, and facing them again won't be easy. I still remember the many times Sierra came to find me after everything went down, Raven by her side. They both pleaded with me, tried everything they could to make me feel better, begged for an explanation when Zane and I ended things. "I won't," I tell him, my voice hard.

He nods and reaches into the inner pocket of his suit jacket before handing me an invitation card. "Good. Because next week, we're flying to Hawaii for Dion's vow renewal, and I've been instructed to bring you with me."

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Chapter Forty-Five

ZANE

“I can’t believe she’s coming with us,” Sierra mumbles as she watches Dion run through the safety checks ahead of our flight for what must be the third or fourth time now. Sierra looks so tormented, so hurt, and I don’t know how to make it better. I don’t particularly want Celeste to come to Dion and Faye’s vow renewal with us either, but Grandma’s orders are impossible to defy.

“Just ignore her if that’s easier,” I tell my sister. “This week is about Dion and Faye. Whatever issues we have with Celeste can wait until later.”

Raven walks up to us from where she was standing with Ares, concern radiating off her. “Make sure you take your own advice,” she warns me, right as a black Windsor car pulls up in front of our private jet.

Celeste steps out of the car hesitantly, and I study her as her gaze settles on Sierra and Raven. She sucks in a breath, regret instantly marring her features. I wondered what she’d look like when faced with the people she hurt, but her expression doesn’t bring me any gratification. It just makes this whole situation feel even more fucked up than it already was. Her presence isn’t just harmful to me, it’s hurting my family. My brothers dropped to their knees for her, pleading with my grandmother in a way they never would have for anyone else, only for her to betray me.

I know Raven and Sierra begged her for explanations when we fell apart, doing all they could to hold us together. When it became clear

nothing would change her mind, they tried their best to maintain their friendship with Celeste, only to be cut out of her life ruthlessly. In the end, I had to tell the girls what Celeste had done to me, just so they'd finally give up on her.

I don't understand my grandmother's rationale — even if the Harrisons and Emersons merged their businesses, they'd at most rival us, but they'd be hard-pressed to overtake us. It doesn't make sense, and my attempts to change her mind have all been futile. If anything, each protest seems to reinforce her decision.

Sierra tenses when Celeste takes a hesitant step toward us, and Raven pulls her away. "Let's get on the plane," she says, her tone firm. It's clear that seeing her is hard on both girls, and I run a hand through my hair in frustration, unsure how to handle the situation.

Celeste looks so fucking helpless as she takes another step toward me, clearly struggling under the weight of my brothers' irritated stares. The right thing to do would be to extend an olive branch to the woman I have to spend the next three years with, but I just don't have it in me.

I take a long, hard look at her and turn away, following Sierra and Raven onto the plane and dismissing her. From behind me, I hear Faye welcome her, taking on the role none of us want, and it takes all of me not to warn her away from Celeste. Faye is too sweet, and her kindness is lost on Celeste.

It isn't long until my fiancée's signature perfume trails behind me, her steps quiet. "Let's sit here," I murmur, choosing seats in the back, far away from the others. For once, there's no argument from her, thank fuck. If I thought I could trust her, I'd ask for a vow — one that guarantees she'll be on her best behavior this weekend. Instead, I just turn and look out the window as we prepare for takeoff.

"Is there anything you need from me while we're there?" she asks, her blue nails digging into her arms, like she's hoping that'll keep her from trembling as much as she is. Once upon a time, I'd have asked her what the shade is called, and I'd have looked for clues in its name. They were always hidden messages — indications of how she feels, or sweet surprises for me.

I raise a brow when I realize her ring finger is empty now, Emerson's ring missing. Something dark and wicked rushes through me at the thought of putting my own ring on her finger, marking her as mine. "Are there any duties I should fulfill as your..."

I tilt my head to look at her face, my heart heavy. *My fiancée*. Once upon a time, I'd wanted nothing more than to call her that. "No," I tell her, my tone flat. "Just stay out of my way."

Much to my surprise, she merely nods and leans back in her seat. I can't figure her out. She's acting like she feels bad for everything she's put my family and me through, when I know that isn't true.

Celeste doesn't say a word throughout the entire flight, doesn't try to provoke me once. Even as we get into a car of our own to the hotel, she's blissfully quiet, choosing to stare out the window. The silence between us almost feels easy, familiar, but I knew it wouldn't last.

"Zane," she says as we pull up in front of our cottage. The way she says my name still sends a thrill running down my spine. "Are we staying in the same room?"

I nod as I walk in and hold the door open for her. She's hesitant as she follows me in, a storm brewing in her eyes. The moment the door closes behind me, she whirls around to face me, her cheeks beautifully rosy. "You can't be delusional enough to think I'd sleep with you," she says, her voice betraying her fluster.

I sigh and unscrew the cap of one of the water bottles my staff provided for us, drinking deeply in an attempt to calm my irritation. "No," I tell her, tearing the bottle away and inadvertently sending a drop of water running down my bottom lip. It makes its way down my throat, and her eyes follow the water streak intently, her expression shifting. Her anger makes way for something else as I slip out of my suit jacket, something that makes my heart beat a little faster. "However, every single time I share a bed with a woman, I end up buried deep inside her, making her beg for more. I doubt this'll be an exception."

Pain flashes through her eyes, and I raise a brow. I didn't think she'd care, but that look in her eyes is one I became intimately acquainted with in the years we were together. Celeste is *jealous*. Interesting.

"I guess you're about to break that streak since I won't be one of them," she snaps.

"You already are."

Anger crosses her face, and she takes a step toward me. "You're insufferable," she tells me. "It'll be a cold day in hell if I ever sleep with you again, Zane Windsor."

I bridge the remaining distance between us and place my index finger underneath her chin. “It does seem rather chilly today, doesn’t it?”

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Chapter Forty-Six

CELESTE

My nerves are shot as I stare in the mirror, taking in my blue sundress and my impeccable makeup. I did it just the way Lily taught me, and I can't help but wonder what she'd think if she saw me today. Would she be disappointed in me? Would she understand I'm only here because I have to be?

I've barely seen Zane since we got here. He's gotten up early to help with the ceremony preparations every day, and he doesn't come to bed until I'm asleep. I've woken up a few times in the middle of the night, startled by the feeling of the mattress dipping, but I haven't had the guts to turn around and face him.

In the quiet of the night, it's harder to hold on to the resentment that fueled me for years. More than once, I've wondered whether he'd pull me close in his sleep like he used to. When we were dating, I'd often wake up with our limbs entangled and him holding me tightly. Now he stays firmly on his side of the bed, our bodies never coming close enough to touch. That should be a relief, but somehow, it just hurts.

"Sweetheart?"

I turn to find Zane's grandmother standing in the doorway to our room, dressed in a beautiful formal gown in the same shade of blue that Dion and Faye requested we all wear.

"I thought you might accompany me to the wedding?"

Relief washes over me, and my entire body relaxes. “Oh,” I breathe. “I’d love to, ma’am.” I’d been worried about entering the venue by myself. I’ve done what Zane asked and kept my distance as best as I could out of respect for Dion and Faye, but I can’t avoid them today.

“Call me Grandma,” she reminds me, her tone sharp.

I clear my throat awkwardly. “Yes, Grandma.”

She smiles so sweetly in response that it’s hard to remember she’s the same woman who told me she didn’t want me anywhere near her granddaughter, the one who now holds my fate in her hands. She offers me her arm, and I hold on to her as we walk to the wedding venue, my anxiety increasing with every step.

I look up at the altar to find Ares, Luca, Zane, Lexington, and Dion standing side by side. Their smiles melt away when they spot me, and I lower my gaze. “Keep your head up,” Grandma Anne demands. “You’re here because I told you to be.”

She might well be the only person who actually wants me here, and the irony isn’t lost on me. I’m trembling as I sit down next to her, feeling Zane’s gaze burning on my skin. He stares at me, his expression darkening by the second.

I can’t help but smile when he clenches his jaw. After the way he completely ignored me for days, it feels strangely good to see how angry it makes him to watch me sit here, in a spot he’d undoubtedly rather give to someone else.

Zane tears his eyes away, and I cross my legs, unable to do the same. He looks amazing in that tux, and I take a moment to study him. He’s always been handsome, but the years have been good to him. He looks stronger, bigger, a little rougher. He’s clean-shaven for the ceremony, but I know that in just a few hours, stubble will be grazing his face. I always loved the way it felt against the soft skin of my thighs. I draw a shaky breath and look down as guilt swiftly eradicates every hint of desire.

A gentle piano melody begins to play and we all rise from our seats, a hush falling over the room. I can’t keep my eyes off Zane as he watches Faye walk in, accompanied by Sierra, Raven, and Valentina. He looks so proud, and it does something to me, unwinds a knot in my stomach and leaves me enthralled. For a few moments, I lose myself in memories of him looking at me in a similar way — not quite as innocent as he does right now, but with the same hints of pride.

The ceremony starts, and we all sit down. I manage to focus on Dion and Faye for a couple of minutes, but my gaze is inadvertently drawn back to Zane. Once upon a time, I'd dreamed of seeing him standing at the end of the aisle. I spent days wondering how he'd look at me when he saw me in my wedding dress, our families surrounding us and wishing us well. I wanted it so desperately, and I'd been so foolish.

In just one more week, we'll get married under vastly different circumstances than we'd imagined all those years ago, and I can't shake that feeling of impending doom. Zane's eyes meet mine, and pure torment crosses his face. I'd give the world to find out what he's thinking as he looks at me like that. Does this moment remind him of the vows we made?

I sigh and lower my eyes when Dion and Faye are pronounced husband and wife for the second time, memories overwhelming me. I can still hear Zane's voice like he spoke the words yesterday. *"I love you, and someday, I'm going to make you my wife. That's a vow, Celeste."* I suppose he kept some vows in the end, just not the most important ones.

The ceremony comes to an end, and I rise to my feet alongside Grandma Anne to meet Zane halfway, as agreed. We're meant to walk together, toward the area Dion and Faye chose for their wedding photos, every moment for the next few hours carefully planned out. "Zane," I murmur, unsure what I'm even trying to say as I take his arm, my touch light.

He leans in, and the way his lips brush against my ear sends a shiver down my body. "Smile, and pretend you actually want to be here with me," he whispers, his tone filled with barely disguised distaste. "Pretending is what you excel at, isn't it? So pretend for me, Celeste."

I pull him to a stop halfway to the photo spot and he turns to look at me, irritation written all over his face. I smile and rise to my tiptoes, my lips brushing against his ear, giving him a taste of what he just did to me.

His arm wraps around my waist instantly, and he pulls me closer, the way he used to. I crash against him, my lips brushing over the part of his ear that's sensitive, the part I used to love biting. "I'm not the problem," I whisper, enjoying the way he begins to harden against me. It's surprising how much of a relief it is to know he still wants me the way he used to. "If you keep glaring at me, you'll worry your family. You don't want that, do you?"

I pull away a little to look at him, my lower body still pressed against his. His gaze is heated, his eyes filled with warnings I'm tempted to ignore. I knew mentioning his family would enrage him, but I forged ahead regardless, wanting him to bleed as much as I am. The ceremony reminded me of everything we could have had, everything he destroyed when he cheated on me. What I did to him in return isn't enough. It'll never be enough.

"I hate you with every fiber of my being," he whispers, his gaze conveying the truthfulness of his words. Seeing me here with his family affected him more than I thought it would. It looks like I'm not the only one walking around with open wounds tonight, and I'm going to do all I can to pour salt into his.

"I'm going to destroy you, Celeste. Everything you put me through will look like child's play compared to the way I'll make you suffer." His hand wraps into my hair, and he grabs a fist full of my curls, his lips hovering over mine for a moment, before he sinks his teeth into my bottom lip angrily, drawing a soft whimper from my throat. "I'll drag you to hell with me," he promises, his breathing ragged. "Right where we both belong."

Chapter Forty-Seven

ZANE

I watch as Dion, Ares, and Luca dance with their wives, their faces lit up with the kind of happiness I once felt too. Faye laughs at something Dion says, and I lift my champagne glass to my lips, knocking it back.

I miss it. The easygoing conversations, the laughter, the intimacy. I miss having a person of my own. It's strange how much I still love the memory of Celeste while hating the reality of her.

"You're Faye's brother-in-law, aren't you?" someone asks, and I glance to my side to find a familiar-looking blonde standing next to me. "I volunteer at the Staccato Foundation with Faye. We met once, briefly."

"Macy," I recall, offering her a kind smile. "You're a botanist, right?"

She smiles back at me and holds out her hand. "Would you like to dance? You look a little lost, just standing here at the edge of the dance floor."

I instantly seek out Celeste, only to find her watching me intently from the other side of the room, her gaze tormented. "I'd love to," I say as I take Macy's hand and pull her into a dance. It's uncontrollable, my urge to prove that I don't want Celeste, when she's all I can think about. Something about the ceremony today fucking enraged me, reminded me of everything she destroyed, everything we could've had. Seeing the way my family responded to her presence reignited the hatred I thought had dulled.

“Would you like to tell me what’s wrong?” Macy asks, her gaze roaming over my face. “I’ve been told I’m a good listener.” I force a smile as we sway to the music, uncertain I could even articulate the problem if I tried. “I suspect it has something to do with the beautiful curly-haired woman that’s staring daggers at me. You were together for the photos, but you’ve been as far apart as possible at any other time. It’s telling, you know? If you didn’t care, you two wouldn’t go so out of your way to avoid each other.”

I smile and lift a brow in surprise. “Either you’re awfully perceptive, or my fiancée and I are being a little obvious.”

Her eyes widen a fraction. “Fiancée, huh? No wonder she seems increasingly agitated. You two must’ve argued.”

I sigh and shake my head. “I wish it was that simple.”

Macy laughs, her gaze endearing. “It is that simple. All that matters is you both still care. So long as you do, anything is fixable. The real problems don’t start until either of you genuinely stops caring about the other, and from where I’m standing, you’re not at risk of that happening anytime soon.”

I raise a brow, intrigued. “What makes you think she still cares?”

Macy laughs and throws me a knowing look. “*Watch.*”

I just about keep from flinching when she cups my face the way Celeste always used to, pushing herself a little closer to me than I’d like. “I’m betting less than ten seconds,” she whispers, beginning to count down from ten, her eyes on mine. There’s something so reassuring in her gaze, as though she knows what it’s like to be where I am. “Six,” she whispers, just before I feel a hand wrap around my arm and pull us apart.

Celeste moves between us, her gaze wild and her breathing uneven as she grips my arm tightly. She looks at me like she isn’t quite sure what she’s doing, but can’t help herself. “Zane,” she says, my name a plea on her lips. She looks so fucking beautiful with her rosy cheeks and those fucking eyes that tell me she’s still *mine*.

Macy throws me a victorious look and steps back with a smile on her face. She winks at me before walking away, and Celeste tenses at the sight of it, her gaze following Macy until she disappears in the crowd.

“What was that for?” I ask, no venom in my voice for once. I pull my fiancée against me, my arms wrapping around her as we begin to dance together, the way we used to.

Celeste lifts her head, and the pain in her eyes fucking guts me. It makes me hold her a little tighter, my heart beating a little faster. “I forgot that you have a thing for blondes,” she murmurs, her voice breaking. The torment in her eyes takes me back five years ago when she first asked me to admit that I’d cheated on her with Lily.

I thread my hand through her thick, curly hair and pull her closer. “Not here,” I warn, my voice hard. “Don’t even dream of ruining this for Dion and Faye.”

Celeste pushes against me and steps away, but I grab her wrist and hold on to her tightly, unable to let go when she looks at me like that. She parts her lips to argue with me, and I level her with a pointed stare as I pull her along and out of the venue, ignoring my siblings’ worried stares as we pass them.

The warm evening breeze makes her curls dance as we walk back to our room, both of us silently seething. She glares at me as I unlock the door and brushes past me, her breathing irregular. “Weren’t you the one who told me that cheating wasn’t an option?” she snaps, her tone filled with accusations as she turns to face me. *Fucking hell*. She looks like a fucking goddess in the darkness of our room, the moonlight illuminating her silhouette. I wish she wasn’t so fucking enchanting. “I suppose it doesn’t count since we won’t be married until next week, is that it? Just what is your definition of cheating, Zane? Enlighten me. How far would you have taken it if I hadn’t intervened?”

I slam the door closed behind us and reach for her, my hands wrapping around her shoulders as I shove her against the door, our bodies flush together. “Shut up, Celeste,” I growl, my lips hovering over hers. She fucking infuriates me. No one has ever affected me the way she does, and fuck, she’s still every bit as maddening as she’s always been.

Celeste is breathing as hard as I am, her eyes flickering from my eyes to my mouth. “Make me,” she whispers, her lips brushing against mine with every word. Her hands slip into my hair just as I suck her bottom lip in between my teeth and bite down, my touch punishing. She gasps, and then she’s kissing me back, the taste of champagne on her tongue diluting her natural sweetness.

She moans when my hands roam over her body, and I tear my lips off hers to kiss her neck. “You’re truly insufferable,” she breathes, even as she tugs at my suit jacket, tearing it off impatiently.

I kiss her just below her ear and grab her hips to lift her up against the wall, loving the way she instantly parts her legs and wraps them around me, a needy whimper escaping her throat as her fingers move to my waistcoat. I hold her up with one arm and use the other to push her underwear aside, pleased to find her dripping for me already.

She whimpers as I drag two fingers over her pussy leisurely and pull back to look at her. The way she looks at me makes me fucking weak. “Zane,” she pleads, and I smirk as I push my fingers into her before curling them. She moans beautifully, and fuck, I’ve missed the sound of her.

“Look at you,” I whisper, fucking pleased. “You’re so wet for me, baby. You want my cock, don’t you?”

Her lips part as I slowly finger-fuck her, and I enjoy watching the desperation in her eyes grow. Having her at my mercy like this is fucking unreal. Celeste reaches for my shirt and undoes the top few buttons, but I wrap my hand around her wrist and drag it down instead, to the waistband of my pants.

“God, I hate you,” she whispers as her gaze roams over my half-unbuttoned shirt and the bow tie that’s still wrapped around my neck, her expression entirely in contrast with her words. She looks at me like nothing else exists, the way she used to.

I narrow my eyes and push against her g-spot, punishing her for her lies. She moans, and I smirk. “Trust me,” I tell her as she pushes down my suit pants, taking my boxers with them. “I’m not particularly fond of you either.”

She looks into my eyes as she grabs my cock and lines me up perfectly. I push the tip in, my eyes falling closed in pure bliss. It’s been so fucking long since I had her, and fuck, I can’t believe I’ve got her back in my arms. “Look at me,” she demands, her tone tinged with desperation. “If you’re going to fuck me, you’d better look at who you’re with, Zane.”

My eyes flutter open as I push an inch into her. “It’s always you, crazy girl,” I whisper. “It’s always been you.”

Her lips part, no doubt to argue with me, and I smirk as I thrust into her, taking her hard and fast. Her eyes widen, and I moan her name, fucking delirious. She’s even tighter and hotter than I remember. “Fuck, Celeste,” I groan as I grab her hips, keeping her in place as I pull back, only to slam back into her harder.

“Oh God, Zane,” she moans, her eyes flickering with something — something that used to be mine.

Hearing my name on her lips makes me feel so fucking unhinged, and she knows it. She pulls on my hair, and I give her what she asked for, fucking her into the door with every bit of repressed anger. “For someone who claims to hate me, you sure do love my cock.”

“Shut up,” she snaps, her grip on my hair tightening as she pulls me closer. Celeste’s hands slide down to my shoulders, and she holds on to me tightly, her eyes on mine as her moans increasingly become more needy, her pleas incoherent. Watching her chase an orgasm used to be my favorite hobby, and fuck, if I’m not careful, I’ll find myself addicted to her all over again.

“Please, Zane,” she moans. “I’m so close.”

I grin and move my hand between us, brushing against her clit as I fuck her slower, taking her right to that edge. “Come for me, beautiful,” I whisper, and she parts her lips as her pussy clenches around my cock, over and over again, until she’s got me groaning, my eyes falling closed as I come right alongside her. “I forgot how good your pussy feels.” I lean into her for support, and her arms wrap around me, her touch soothing.

I lean back a little to kiss her, this one different to the ones that came before it. For the first time since she came back, I kiss her the way I used to, back when she used to be mine, and she responds in kind.

Chapter Forty-Eight

ZANE

My thoughts are spiraling out of control as I stare out of the window, memories of Celeste plaguing me. It's the woman I thought she was that I wanted to marry, not the one I've come to know. I've been up all night, unable to stop thinking of the way she felt against me last week, glimpses of the woman I loved shining through. If I'm not careful, she'll trick me all over again. I'd slipped out of bed before she woke up, and we both pretended nothing had happened — like we were ashamed of our choices, our weakness.

I sit up when a knock sounds on the door of my room in our wedding venue and glance at it in surprise. I told my siblings I didn't want company this morning, and I'd hoped they'd heed my words. Going through with this is hard enough without their disapproving stares. I'm so close to walking out of here and never looking back, and I didn't think it would be like that.

When things ended between Celeste and me, I knew I'd end up accepting an arranged marriage, but I hadn't expected to be this reluctant. Especially since in the end, it's her I'm marrying after all.

I sigh as I pull the door open, irritated and ready to tell my brothers to fuck off, only to find Archer and George standing there. I stare at them in shock for a few moments, shame cascading over me. In my quest to hurt Celeste, I hurt them too. I still remember the way they both came to me, asking me to stop attacking Harrison Developments. I'd looked them in the

eye and told them the only reason the company still existed at all was because of the respect I still had for them. It was a low blow, a way to remind them who I am and what I'm capable of, and the disappointment in their eyes told me everything they wouldn't.

"Can we come in?" George asks.

I nod and stand aside. Archer's gaze roams over the room like he doesn't know where to look, or isn't quite sure what he's doing here. We used to be such good friends — all of my brothers loved him as much as I did. He'd become one of us as much as Xavier is, and I'd cut him out of our lives ruthlessly, ignored every one of his attempts to reach out and salvage our friendship.

George walks over to the small seating area in the corner and sits down, placing the bag he brought with him by his feet. I hesitate for a moment, before following Archer and sitting down too. "I didn't expect... this," I say, sounding a lot more awkward than I have in years. It's odd how quickly I become the man I used to be around them.

George smiles and leans over, startling me when he straightens my bowtie before gently doing the same to the rose boutonniere on my suit, crafted from my mother's flowers. I thought he'd hate me fiercely, but he still looks at me the way he used to right before everything went down — like I'm family. "You're about to become my son-in-law. It's not so odd that I'd want to have a word with you beforehand, is it?"

I shake my head, and Archer straightens, his gaze hard. In the last couple of years, he's become a force to be reckoned with. I'm as proud of him as I am of my own brothers, yet I can't convey that — I don't feel like I have the right to. "The day Celeste introduced you as her boyfriend, we took you out to the garden," Archer says, his tone flat. "Do you remember what you promised us then?"

I look away, remembering how in love I was. They'd caught Celeste and me in a compromising situation and took me outside, violent intent coming off them in waves.

"I love Celeste with all my heart, and someday, I'm going to make her my wife," I told them. "Until then, I'll do all I can to prove to you that I deserve to be her husband. I know there's a lot standing in the way of our happiness, but together, there's nothing she and I can't overcome. I understand you don't believe me right now, but you will. I'll make sure of it. I'm going to make her the happiest woman in the world."

“I remember.”

George reaches for the bag he brought and pulls out a familiar whiskey bottle. It's the one I gave him the first time I had dinner at their house, the one that used to be my father's. I stare at it in awe, something tightening in my chest as I take in its untouched state. “I've been saving this for today,” he tells me, a wry smile on his face as Archer reaches for the glasses they brought.

I'm silent as George pours my father's whiskey. “It won't come as a surprise to you when I tell you that you've let me down.” I tense, my gaze downcast. “I don't know what happened between you two, Zane, but I know my daughter isn't blameless. For years, I watched you two try to hurt each other, and I know it won't stop anytime soon. The only question I have for you today is this: do you, underneath all that hatred I now see in your eyes, still love my daughter?”

I stare at him wide-eyed, my heart pounding wildly. I hadn't expected a question like that — warnings, perhaps. Threats, certainly. This? Not in a million years.

“Yes.”

I can't lie to the man who had become like a father to me when Celeste and I dated. We spent so many nights drinking and perfecting our attempts to cheat at games we'd play on family nights, because we could never beat the girls, and all the while, we forged a relationship that I still miss.

Archer hands me a glass and nods, satisfied with my answer. “Then this is what we'll do,” he says, his voice calmer than I'd expected. “Each time we see you, we'll share a glass. By the time this bottle is empty, you'll need to have fulfilled your promise, or I'll do what my sister doesn't have the heart to — I'll fucking annihilate you, consequences be damned.”

I nod slowly, uncertain this is a promise I can keep. I'm not even sure I want to, and if I did, Celeste would never let me. She still wants me, that much is clear, but she also wants to see me burn. I don't have it in me to let them down any further, yet I can't say the words they need to hear.

George sighs and taps his glass against mine, accepting my silent nod, and Archer does the same. “For real this time: welcome to the family, asshole,” Archer grumbles, and I can't help but smile, remembering the first time he said those words to me.

Chapter Forty-Nine

CELESTE

“You look beautiful, honey,” Mom says, her voice trembling. I look into the mirror, my eyes meeting hers as she positions herself behind me and gently squeezes my shoulders over my soft silk robe.

My makeup looks natural but elegant, and for once, my hair has been wrangled into a smooth bun that sits low, a few stray curls strategically framing my face. I look like a bride, but I don’t feel like one.

Guilt hits me harder than ever before, and I try my best to push aside my grief. I’d always thought I’d have Lily with me on my wedding day as my maid of honor. I’ve imagined this day so many times, but never did I think I’d find myself sitting in the bridal room of a venue I’ve never been to before, unsure what my wedding dress even looks like.

The Windsors took care of the entire wedding, and though Grandma Anne asked for my input a few times, she mostly decided on things herself. I feel like an uninvited guest at someone else’s wedding. An imposter.

“I know today isn’t easy for you, Celeste,” Mom says. “But have some faith, okay? You once loved him, and I think you’ll learn to do so again.”

I look into her eyes, wishing I had the words to explain why the future she envisions can’t come to pass. I’d be lying if I said I didn’t still have feelings for him, or that I don’t want him as much as I used to. I do, but hatred and years of pain drown out everything else.

“More importantly,” I murmur. “We’ll be able to undo some of the damage the company sustained. I’m looking forward to getting back to work and turning Grandpa’s legacy into more than he could’ve dreamed of.”

Mom sighs and rubs my shoulder. “*You* are his legacy, Celeste,” she tells me. “Archer and you.”

I force a smile for her. If only Grandpa felt the same way. It’s been years, and Archer and Grandpa still barely speak — because he valued his company more than his grandson. He still does, or I wouldn’t be getting married into a family he can’t stand, to a man that destroyed everything I held dear.

A knock sounds on the door, and Mom frowns as she opens it. I rise from my seat at the sound of Raven’s voice and turn toward her in surprise. Her eyes meet mine, and the trepidation in them renders me speechless for a moment. My gaze drops to the garment bag in her arms, and she sighs.

“I brought this for you.” Her voice is soft, hesitant.

“For me?”

She nods and walks toward me, her gaze running over my face. She steadfastly ignored me throughout Dion’s wedding, just like Sierra did. Each time we were in the same room, she’d tense, pain and anger flickering through her eyes. I knew I’d have to face her sometime soon, but I hadn’t expected her to take the first step.

Raven unzips the bag, and tears instantly fill my eyes when she takes out the wedding dress of my dreams — the one I’d told her about back when she was still drawing designs for fun, and marriage had been something I was looking forward to.

She throws me a shaky smile. “I designed this with you in mind. It’s one of my very first creations, but I never had the heart to put it up for sale. It just didn’t feel right, and I guess now I know why. It was always meant for you.”

She drapes the dress over my chair before leaning in and carefully swiping my tears away. “Don’t cry,” she orders, her tone tormented. “You’ll ruin your makeup. I’ll already have plenty of work to do with final alterations on this dress, so don’t make me touch up your makeup too. You won’t be the exact same size you were when I last measured you five years ago.”

“Why would you do this for me?” I ask, my voice breaking. Raven and Sierra are my biggest regrets — I’ve missed them terribly, but I’ve hurt them nearly as much as I’ve hurt Zane. The only difference is they never deserved it like he did.

“I don’t know. I guess I just have a habit of loving people who don’t love me back, of holding on too long in an effort to belong. I don’t have it in me to forgive you, Celeste, but that doesn’t mean I don’t want you to be happy.”

I burst out crying and bury my face in my hands, my shoulders shaking as I try my best to keep my grief contained. Mom wraps her arm around me and pulls me into her, holding me together when all I want to do is fall apart.

“Please don’t cry,” Raven pleads, her voice betraying how close to tears she is, and I nod, trying my best to stop. “Let’s get you into your dress, hmm?”

I’m trembling as she swipes away my tears, devastation written all over her face. It’s clearly hard for her to stand here and be the better person, but she’s here regardless, because that’s the kind of person she is. I never deserved the friendship she offered me, now even less so than before.

“It’s a near-perfect fit,” she says as she takes her sewing kit out of her bag. The way she looks at me is so bittersweet. It’s like the designer in her is pleased with the way the dress turned out, but the woman underneath feels conflicted seeing it on me, the person it was intended for but who doesn’t deserve to wear it.

I stand as still as I can as she makes some final adjustments, taking the moment to study her. She was always stunning, but she’s even prettier now, in a way that betrays her happiness. She’s glowing in a way she didn’t used to, like she’s finally loved and appreciated the way she always wanted to be. It hurts to know I wasn’t there to witness that transformation. I wasn’t there when she graduated, nor was I by her side when she got married. What would she think if I told her I followed the news coverage about her intently? That more than once, I’d dialed her number only to hang up the second it rang?

Raven pushes a beautiful golden hairpin that looks vaguely familiar into my hair. “I’ll let you borrow this,” she murmurs, her voice breaking. “I’ll let you know when to return it. Keep it until then.”

I nod, and she carefully begins to fix my hair and makeup for me, ensuring it's all perfect. "I'm sorry," I whisper, the words spilling out of me involuntarily.

She freezes for a fraction of a second and looks up, her gaze hardening. "I'm not the person who needs to hear those words."

I tense, helplessness washing over me. "You don't understand," I tell her.

Something akin to frustration flashes through her eyes. "No," she says, her tone sharp. "I don't, and I probably never will. I'm not even sure I want to anymore, you know? Your rationale won't undo the pain you caused."

She steps back, her gaze roaming over my dress one final time before she sighs and turns her back to me. Raven pauses by the door and glances over her shoulder. "Don't hurt him again, Celeste. He won't survive it a second time."

I tense, the injustice of it all hitting me hard. I put my shield back up, and disappointment flashes through her eyes as she walks away.

"Come on, sweetie," Mom says, her expression complicated. "Let's not keep your father or Zane waiting any longer."

Chapter Fifty

ZANE

My brothers look restless when I walk in, their reactions mixed. Ares, Luca, and Dion look relieved, but Lex radiates annoyance. He reluctantly hands Luca a fifty, and I shake my head as I pop a peppermint candy into my mouth, the taste of menthol soothing my nerves.

“Cutting it close,” Ares says as I take my place at the altar, my gaze roaming over the venue. It’s stunning and far more beautifully decorated than I’d expected. I know Grandma put Sierra in charge of the wedding decorations, and I thought she might take it as an opportunity to show her displeasure, doing only the bare minimum. She hasn’t.

My eyes meet hers from her seat on the front row, and she smiles, her gaze haunted and unsure. She’s worried for me, but the hope in her eyes is hard to miss. Despite everything, she wants this to work out. If I asked her the question Celeste’s father just asked me, would she answer the same way I did? I suspect so.

A beautiful melody begins to play, and I look to my side to find my sister-in-law, Faye, seated behind the piano. My heart warms at the sight of her, and she shoots me an encouraging look, one that tells me she understands, and that everything is going to be okay. I smile back at her and straighten when the doors open.

My breath hitches, and everything fades away as she walks in on her father’s arm. *My Celestial*. She’s like a vision from my wildest dreams, the

ones where I get to live in the past just a little longer, and looking at her hurts. That fucking dress. It kills me to know she'd wanted to wear it for Clifton, and had planned to let him take it off her.

I draw a shaky breath, barely able to drag my eyes off her long enough to throw George a polite nod. He smiles at me, his eyes filled with so much trust as he places Celeste's hand in mine, and I hold on to her tightly, both of us trembling as we face each other.

She lifts her gaze, and *fuck*, just like that, she steals my breath away. She looks at me the way she used to, like I'm all she can see, and it makes me fucking weak in the knees. For a few moments, it's easy to imagine that we made it, that we both *want* to be here, and that the future will be as we once envisioned it. It's an illusion, but it's one I cling to all the same. I'm so caught up in her gaze I can barely focus on the ceremony. I don't snap out of it until the officiant addresses me.

"Do you, Zane Windsor, take Celeste Harrison as your wife? Do you vow to love her, comfort her, honor and keep her for better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and health, and forsaking all others, be faithful only to her, for as long as you both shall live?"

Celeste's breathing accelerates, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. "I do."

Her hand trembles as I push a plain gold wedding band onto her finger. Val was in charge of the rings, and she seems convinced that I'll want to replace them one day. Everyone so desperately hopes this'll work out for the better, but Celeste and I aren't like Luca and Val.

"Celeste Harrison, do you take Zane Windsor as your husband? Do you vow to love him, comfort him, honor and keep him for better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and health and forsaking all others, be faithful only to him so long as you both shall live?"

She draws a shaky breath, and a tear spills down her cheek as her gaze turns into something I've never seen before — a deep longing tinged with desperation and regret. "I do," she says, her voice breaking.

She's trembling so hard she nearly drops my ring, and I smile tenderly when she pushes it onto my finger, the sight of it tightening something in my chest. I never knew how much power a wedding ring could hold, but it truly does make me feel married.

I can't look away from her tormented eyes as we're pronounced husband and wife, my heart aching in a bittersweet kind of way. Does it

truly hurt her this much to marry me? Why? Because of Lily? Clifton? Perhaps it's both.

"You may now kiss the bride."

Her gaze drops to my mouth, and I lean in to kiss her, intent on keeping it brief and chaste, but Celeste tilts her head as my lips meet hers, her hand wrapping around the back of my neck to pull me closer. I groan, every good intention going out the window when she kisses me back, the taste of menthol enveloping us both.

I wrap my hand around her waist and part her lips, my tongue tasting, teasing. A soft moan escapes from the back of her throat, just for me, and her grip on me tightens when she feels the way I harden for her. Her tongue tangles with mine, and she steals away my candy the way she used to. It does something to me, still.

The sound of cheering around us slowly brings me back to the present, and I pull away reluctantly. Celeste looks at me, her gaze overflowing with emotions — lust, uncertainty, but also something I don't quite dare name. Another tear rolls down her face, and I sigh as I drop my forehead to hers. I draw a shaky breath before dipping in and stealing another kiss. She lets me, melting into me as I cup her face, discreetly swiping away her tears as I kiss her tenderly.

"Still disgusting," Lex mutters, and Celeste chuckles against my mouth before pulling back, the sound bringing me the kind of pure joy I've been missing. He hasn't spoken a word to her in the weeks leading up to our wedding, not even in Hawaii, but this feels a little like an olive branch.

I keep my arm wrapped around Celeste's waist as we turn to face our guests, my gaze settling on Grandma, who's got the most calculative yet pleased look in her eyes. I clench my jaw, instantly feeling on edge, and she grins at me. Ed Harrison looks much the same, and the look the two share doesn't sit well with me. Next to him, though, sit Clara, George, and Archer. Clara smiles at me with a loving gaze. There's no blame in her eyes, despite everything I did to Harrison Developments.

"Let's go," I murmur, my hand slipping into Celeste's. She tightens her grip, like she's holding on to me for strength. Thankfully, we opted to skip photos, knowing no one would be comfortable being forced together like that. Instead, we have a photographer taking candid shots. I don't think I could force Sierra to stand anywhere near Celeste right now, and while Ed

and my grandmother seem to be on speaking terms today, I don't particularly want to risk it.

Celeste barely looks at me, keeping her focus straight ahead as we go through the motions and engage with our guests, her body tense next to mine. "We need to dance and cut the cake, then we can go," I whisper as the last guest congratulates us.

She nods, her body freezing imperceptibly as I wrap my hand around her waist, keeping up the charade. It's a slippery slope, pretending with her.

I lead her to the dance floor, and she looks uncertain when I offer her my hand. "What?" I murmur, my heart racing. "Did you forget how to dance?"

Her lips part as the familiar words register, and vulnerability crosses her face when she places her hand in mine, her gold nail polish sparkling in the light. "No," she tells me, her voice trembling. "I just don't want to dance with *you*."

I smile as I pull her against me, and she smiles back. Those words were the start of something new at the gala, and standing here with her, right where we always hoped to be, I wish they could be again.

Chapter Fifty-One

ZANE

“Wait,” I tell Celeste as I follow her to my front door, mesmerized by the way the moonlight illuminates her silhouette, making her look like a real goddess in that wedding dress. It’s surreal that she’s my *wife* now. “Let me carry you in, Celeste.”

She looks back over her shoulder and raises a brow. “You can’t be serious.” She pauses, her eyes flashing with annoyance. “We’re alone now, Zane. There’s no need to keep pretending this is real.”

Irrational anger begins to simmer in me, and I grit my teeth as I bridge the distance between us. “Why does everything always have to be so difficult with you, huh?” I reach for her, my touch possessive as I bend down and throw her over my shoulder in one smooth move.

She gasps and thrashes against me as I carry her over the threshold, kicking the door closed before marching to my bedroom. I should’ve known she wouldn’t keep up her sweet act longer than necessary.

“*Zane*,” she warns, right before I throw her onto my bed unceremoniously. Celeste glares at me as she scrambles to her knees, and I smile tauntingly in return. “Couldn’t you just have put me down like a normal person?” she asks, fury blazing in her eyes as she pushes against my chest, her anger only mounting when she realizes she can’t move me.

I grab her chin and tilt her face up, letting my temper get the best of me. “Can’t you just act like a normal fucking bride for ten fucking seconds?”

These traditions might not mean a thing to you, but they mean something to *me*.”

Her gaze softens, only for renewed anger to blaze through them. “You want me to act like a real bride?” she asks, slowly dragging her hand down my chest. My abs tense under her fingers, and a hint of victory flashes through her eyes as she hooks her finger into the waistband of my suit pants.

Fuck. Just having her hands on me like that is enough to make me hard, and I fucking despise how much she revels in the knowledge. Celeste pulls me closer, and I go willingly, my knees hitting the edge of the bed.

Her eyes meet mine, and that provocative gaze of hers makes my heart skip a beat. “What’s next? Are you going to ask me to suck you off like a good little wife? It is our wedding night, after all.”

I gently move one of her stray curls behind her ear, wishing her hair was loose tonight so I could grab it the way I want to. “You know what? I think I will.” She sucks in a breath when my hand wraps around her wrist, my eyes on hers as I push it down until I’ve got her palm pressed against my erection.

“For a man who claims to hate me, you’re awfully hard,” she snaps, throwing the words I spoke in Hawaii back at me. Her breathlessness undermines the anger she tries to cling to, and I can’t help but grin at her as her fingers clutch at my zipper. I thought she’d end her charade here, but her gaze darkens as she takes out my cock, satisfaction flashing through her eyes. I inhale sharply when she looks up and presses her hot mouth to the tip, her tongue darting out for a taste.

“Don’t take it personally, sweetheart,” I murmur, irritated by the power she still has over me. “I get hard for every wet, eager mouth that comes near my cock.”

For a split second, I’m sure I see pain flicker in her eyes when she looks up at me, but all it does is make me want her more. I want her at my mercy, begging for me. “I really do hate you,” she whispers, her breath caressing my sensitive skin.

“And I like you a lot better when that vicious mouth of yours is too preoccupied to speak.”

Her eyes flash, and she slowly drags her tongue down, torturing me. I wrap my hand around the back of her neck, my low moans indicating how

badly she's making me lose control already. "You want me, don't you?" she whispers, her breath making my cock tingle.

I tighten my grip on her neck and tilt my hips, making my cock push up against her lips. "Shut the fuck up and suck your husband's cock, Celeste. We both know you want to."

I push harder, desperate for what she's teasing me with, and something flashes in her eyes. She opens up, letting me slip into her hot little mouth, and I groan when she clamps down on me, sucking hard as her tongue explores the ridges, finding every sensitive spot with ease — like she remembers everything the way I do.

"*Fuck,*" I moan when she takes me deep, my hand slipping up her nape and into her hair. I keep her in place and pull out, only to push back into her mouth harder, fucking her face while she looks up at me in that stunning wedding dress. "You're so good at this, Mrs. Windsor."

She moans and looks up at me, with something an awful lot like possessiveness in her eyes. I smirk at her, well aware that her tongue is so sensitive this'll turn her on like crazy.

"Look at the way you're sucking your husband's cock, Celeste," I murmur, pulling back so I'm nearly slipping out, only to push back in deeper, sliding down the back of her throat gently, carefully. She takes me the way she used to, swallowing around me with pure lust in her eyes. "You're such a good girl, aren't you?" She sucks harder, her moans vibrating in the most amazing way. I could come just like that, and she knows it, loves that I'm at her mercy.

"Come here," I murmur as I pull all the way out and take a step back. A displeased whimper escapes her lips, and she's so fucking sexy with that pleading look in her eyes.

I hold out my hand for her, and she looks like she wants to disobey me just for the hell of it, but then she does as I ask and stands in front of me, her gaze defiant. Sometimes it's like I don't know her at all, but right here, right now? She's an open book. My wife is mad that she wants me, desperate for more, and unwilling to ask for it.

Her breathing is shallow, her eyes on mine as I reach around her to rip her dress off, sending buttons flying all over my bedroom. My wife's dress pools around her, revealing the deep blue lingerie she's wearing, complete with the sexiest garters I've ever seen, and for a few moments, all I can do

is stare at her. “I thought you didn’t care about traditions?” I ask, mesmerized. She’s so fucking beautiful, it’s unreal.

Something flickers in her eyes, and she straightens her shoulders, emboldened by my gaze. “I do — for the right man. I didn’t buy this for you.”

Her words take a moment to register, but when they do, searing pain cuts through my chest. Knowing it was never meant for me is fucking maddening, but the mere thought of Clifton seeing her in this, of her taking his cock the way she just took mine... it fucking wrecks me. My touch is rough as I grab her shoulders and turn her around, unwilling to show her my torment. “Get on your knees,” I snap, pushing her forward.

She stumbles and gasps before obeying, victory flashing in her eyes as she looks back over her shoulder tauntingly, her ass up in the air for me. How many times have I had her like this, begged her to let me fuck her in this position? She knows exactly what she’s doing to me.

I grab her ass and knead, my touch rough as my thumbs tease her soaking wet panties. She moans as I push the fabric aside. “What would Clifton say if he saw you like this, hmm?” I coat my fingers in her wetness, harshly circling her clit a few times. “Look at how wet you got just from sucking me off, Celeste. I barely even touched you.”

She whimpers and bucks her hips to get me where she wants me. I obey her silent commands and drag two fingers around her clit, trapping it in between them as I tease her and build her up slowly. Five years, and her body still responds the same. “*Zane*,” she moans, and *fuck*, it’s so fucking exhilarating to hear her say my name like that. “*Please*,” she whimpers when she gets close, her tone betraying how hard it is for her to ask for it.

I smirk and pull my hand away. “Do you want to come for me, Celeste?” I ask, my tone harsh and demanding as I tap her pussy with my cock, rubbing up against her the way she likes it, the tip pushing against her clit with every movement.

“Yes,” she moans. “Please, Zane. *Please*.”

I’ve always loved bringing her right to the edge, just to see how she begs for my cock. I drag my cock back, leaving her throbbing clit alone, and she whimpers. “Who do you belong to?” I ask, grabbing her hips to keep her in place. If she keeps moving like that, I’ll slip into her before I’m good and ready to, and I’m not done toying with her.

“*You*, Zane,” she instantly tells me, breathing hard. “Only you.”

I slip a fraction into her, earning myself a delicious moan. “That’s right, baby,” I murmur. “You’re mine. *My wife.*”

I pull back out and grab the base of my cock, sliding the tip against her hard, rubbing up against her clit in a way I know she can’t resist. “Please,” she begs. “I’m so close, Zane. *Please.* Give it to me.”

I chuckle, unable to help myself. “I love it when you beg like that, Celestial,” I murmur, before thrusting into her, burying myself deep inside my wife just as I tease her clit with my wedding ring. She moans my name as her pussy constricts around me, squeezing hard as she comes for me.

Fuck. This will never get old. My hands roam over her body as she comes down from her high, and she whimpers softly when I trace over her bra and make her tits spill out. I tease her nipple with one hand while keeping her steady with the other, grabbing her waist tightly. She moves her hips, and I moan, her eagerness further fueling mine.

“Fuck yourself on my cock.” She looks back, presenting me with a vision so fucking ethereal that I can’t tear my eyes off her as she moves her hips, her fingers gripping the sheets. “Such a good girl,” I murmur as she fucks me on her hands and knees, her pussy throbbing around me.

She throws me a teasing look and begins to move slowly, taunting me, provoking me into taking her the way she likes. “Like that?” she asks, her tone filled with mirth. I narrow my eyes in warning, but she ignores it as she slowly pushes back onto my cock, depriving me of what I asked for.

“You never fucking listen, do you?” I wrap my arm around her stomach and pull her upright until I’ve got her back pressed against my chest and her knees on the edge of the bed. Her head drops back against my shoulder, and I wrap one hand around her throat while the other runs down her body to settle between her legs.

Celeste tilts her face, and I lean in to kiss her, a wave of emotions coming over me as I take her lips slowly, my cock buried deep inside her and my fingers pressing against her pussy. “Zane,” she whispers against my lips, and fuck, I could come right there and then.

She moans when I circle her sensitive clit, and I keep her in place with my palm. “One more,” I murmur. “Give me one more, Celeste.”

I fuck her just like that, one hand between her legs and the other around her throat, the sound of her pleas filling my bedroom. For just a little while, it’s like we’re in the past, and there’s nothing but us. She moans so beautifully, and I sigh against her neck. “That’s it, baby,” I murmur,

thrusting into her deeper, to a point where she struggles to cope. “You’re taking me so nice and good, Celeste. You drive me crazy, you know?”

She shifts her hips, and I tease her harder, taking her to the edge. “I’m so close,” she whispers. I press a kiss to her shoulder and feel the resulting shiver run down her spine. I smile and do it again, and again, knowing how much she likes it. “*Zane*.” This time her tone is a warning, one I don’t heed.

I tilt my face and kiss her neck before sucking down on it, marking her. “Come for me,” I whisper into her ear as I synchronize the way I push my cock into her with the way my fingers move.

She does, and fuck, she takes me right along with her. The way she comes around my cock still makes me see fucking stars, like it always has. I drop my forehead to her shoulder, my breathing ragged as I fill up her pretty pussy.

I told myself I’d keep my distance, that I wouldn’t let her provoke me, so how the fuck did I find myself buried deep inside her all over again?

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Chapter Fifty-Two

CELESTE

Unexpected loneliness hits me hard when I wake up all alone in Zane's bed, dressed in nothing but my bridal lingerie. His entire room feels unfamiliar, and I didn't think it'd hurt so much to know he went through such great lengths to erase me from his life. I did the same, after all.

My fingers wrap around the sheets as last night's events flash through my mind, and heat rushes to my cheeks. Zane pulled out of me the second he came, the spell we were both under breaking instantly. He barely spared me a glance as he tidied his clothes and walked away, leaving me in his bed, evidence of what we'd done all over my thighs.

In Hawaii, we'd both been drinking, but last night... last night was different. Maybe it was the way he called me *Celestial*, or the way he called me his *wife*. I felt enchanted, desperate to lose myself in him, and I know the feeling was mutual.

I sigh as I get out of bed, surprised to find half his walk-in wardrobe already filled with my clothes. Bitterness seeps in at the sight of it, reality slowly tugging at me for attention. I bite down on my lip and walk into his shower, suddenly desperate to wash every last trace of him off me. I wasn't supposed to feel this good with him, wasn't supposed to forget. Being around him again is confusing, and I'm scared I'll lose sight of my goals over time. How am I supposed to last three years when I couldn't even

resist him for one single night? Even in Hawaii... it wasn't me who stayed away. It was him.

I bury my hands in my hair and squeeze my eyes closed, my chest aching as water rains down on me. Remorse takes hold, and I draw a shaky breath when Lily crosses my mind, followed by everything Zane has done to Harrison Developments. When he touches me, it's so easy to pretend he's the man I used to love, when that version of him never truly existed.

By the time I'm dressed and ready for the day, I'm much calmer, my usual shield back in place, fueled by guilt. Zane looks up when I walk into the kitchen, and I pause, surprised to find him leaning against the counter with a coffee cup in his hand, a black t-shirt covering his torso and a pair of gray sweats hanging low on his hip.

"Morning," he says, his tone gruff and his expression guarded. "I trust you slept well?"

I nod and take a hesitant step forward, unsure what to do or say. It's hard to believe that he's my *husband* now, when neither of us can stand the other. I've never felt this way — so conflicted.

Zane pushes off the counter and sighs, reluctance written all over his face. "Why don't I show you around? You'll be living here for the foreseeable future, after all."

He walks out of the kitchen before waiting for me to respond, and irritation cascades over me as I follow him. Zane barely looks at me as he moves from room to room, his expression carefully blank, like he's trying to hide how much I'm inconveniencing him.

Something heavy settles in my chest when I realize every single aspect of his house has changed. Some of the walls have been knocked down, and the layout is entirely different. Five years ago, I could navigate this place in my sleep. "Is there anything you didn't change?" I ask without thinking, suddenly feeling aggrieved for reasons I can't admit to.

He glances over his shoulder and sighs as he leads me back to the kitchen. "No." Zane runs a hand through his hair, the gesture so familiar that it makes my heart ache. "I guess I'll have to change it again in three years."

He pauses in the middle of his kitchen and turns to face me, his expression guarded as we study each other. I take in the slight stubble on his jaw, his messy hair, and the gray sweats that he knows I've always loved.

The sense of loss completely overwhelms me, and I draw a shaky breath as my mind begins to torment me with visions of him with someone else.

“Who is it?” I ask, my voice trembling more than I’d have liked. “The girl you renovated the house for.” I still remember how he redid his whole driveway because I’d complained about the way my heels were damaged by his gravel. It’d only take a few comments from a girl he’s devoted to for him to redo his whole house, and it kills me that it’s no longer me. Maybe it never was.

Zane stares at me and crosses his arms, his expression hardening. “That’s not really any of your business, is it?”

My heart lurches, and something dark and twisted settles in my stomach. “It is,” I snap. “I’m your *wife*.”

He looks disarmed for a moment, and then he sighs. Zane walks up to me, and I tense when he reaches for me, my heart skipping a beat. His hands wrap around my waist, and he lifts me on top of his kitchen counter effortlessly, the way he used to. I instinctively place my palm on his chest, his t-shirt soft against my fingers.

Zane parts my legs to stand between them, and I look up at him, feeling oddly vulnerable. How many times have we stood together like this? How many times has he wrapped his hand in my hair and kissed me, only to end up taking me in this exact position, telling me I’m his goddess, that he can’t get enough?

“Are you?” he asks, his thumbs caressing me just below my chest. “Are you my wife, Celeste? Or are you just someone I was forced to share my last name with for a couple of years?”

I slide my hand up to his shoulders, my heart pounding wildly. “Does it matter?”

“It does. Marriage has always been important to me, and this... this isn’t a real marriage.”

I tighten my grip on him, my nails digging into him as bitterness seeps into my soul. “What is this supposed to be? A prelude to your justification for infidelity? Our marriage might be a sham, but the contract we signed was real. Don’t you *dare* cheat on me, Zane.”

He tightens his grip on my waist and leans in, a soft sigh on his lips as he drops his forehead to my shoulder. Zane turns his face, his lips brushing past the spot he marked last night, and my heart begins to race. He stays there for a few moments, and I’m so tempted to wrap my arms around him

like I used to, to hold on tight and lose myself in his embrace. It's been so long since anyone has hugged me, and I miss that kind of intimacy more than I thought I would.

When Zane pulls back to look at me, he seems weary, tired. "I won't keep doing this with you," he says, his voice barely above a whisper. "I won't play these games with you anymore. I can't, Celeste — I can't spend the next three years of my life in constant battle."

He lets go of me and inhales deeply, his shirt riding up a little as he runs a hand through his hair, giving me a glimpse of his abs. He levels me with a stare so heartbroken that it takes my breath away. "I won't cheat on you," he tells me, his tone conveying his sincerity. "I never have, and I never will. The fact you won't believe me is what tore us apart in the first place. I'll never forgive you for what you've done, both to us, and to my business." He reaches for me and pushes a curl behind my ear. "There was a time I'd have done anything for you." He shakes his head, regret marring his face as he pulls his hand back. "Now I don't want anything to do with you."

"Stop it," I whisper, my voice breaking. "It's been five years since my best friend took her own life after *begging* me to forgive her for being with *you*. The very least you could do to honor her memory is be honest. What do you stand to gain from denying it after all these years?"

He looks away and sighs. "Indeed, Celeste. What do I stand to gain?"

Chapter Fifty-Three

CELESTE

I'm beyond nervous as I get dressed for work, unsure what to expect. Grandpa and Grandma Anne worked quickly with the merger, but one of their stipulations was that Zane and I work together from Windsor Hotel's headquarters to finalize the details.

Beyond our wedding night and the tour of his house, I haven't really seen Zane. I wasn't sure what I was expecting, but somehow, I didn't expect to be eating by myself every day, wondering where he is. I've been roaming his house for clues about who he's become, with no one around me but his housekeeper.

I know he sleeps next to me based on the messy sheets in the morning and the half-drunk water glasses he leaves on his bedside table, but I haven't seen him all weekend. It's likely for the best, but somehow, it doesn't sit well with me. I can't help but wonder where he is — or *who* he's with, when he isn't with me.

I pause in surprise when I find Zane leaning against the front door, his eyes on his phone. He smiles down at it, and an emotion I've only ever felt for him latches onto me. *Jealousy*. What is it that made him smile like that?

He looks up at the sound of my heels, his expression instantly becoming guarded as he slips his phone into the inside pocket of his navy three-piece suit. I hate how good it looks on him. "Let me drive you to work, since

we're both going to the same place. I've asked my driver to pick up your car, so it'll be here when we get back."

I nod and walk up to him hesitantly. His gaze roams over my nude pencil skirt and my favorite white blouse, his gaze impassive. I feel a pang of disappointment when there's no appreciation in his eyes and berate myself for it instantly. I thought the years we spent apart, silently scheming against each other, would've eradicated all of my remaining feelings. So why did they come rushing back at the sight of him?

Zane walks to his car and gets behind the wheel, surprising me. He's always opened the door for me, even before we started dating. I forgot it isn't something he ever did for anyone but me and members of his family. I bite back the unwarranted sense of loss and walk around the car, unable to pinpoint why I'm so hurt. Isn't this the best-case scenario? We're not arguing with each other, and he's acting civilized. That should make me happy, but instead, I find myself wanting to provoke him.

I need to know who he's opening doors for now, and if it's something he used to do for Lily too. What was it that made him smile just now, and where has he been spending his days? I bite my lip to keep from asking questions that'll only lead to arguments, my gaze on the scenery that passes us on the way to the office.

Zane runs a hand through his hair, and I glance at him, taking in his side profile. It's odd to think he's my *husband* now, despite everything. I sigh as the way he looked at me in his kitchen flashes through my mind, and I hate the doubt he instilled in me. Even when faced with clear proof, he denied every allegation and kept insisting he never cheated. Was it because Lily wasn't around to tell her story? Because he thought he'd get away with it? So many years have passed, but instead of finding answers, I'm left with even more questions.

I don't snap out of my daze until he parks his car, and the ignition cuts off. Zane doesn't say a word as he gets out of the car, and I rush to follow him. The closer we get to the building, the more agitated he gets. He tries to hide it, but I see it in the way he holds his shoulders, the way his jaw locks. "This is my private elevator," he explains, pressing his thumb to the scanner. "It goes directly to my office, but it stops at every floor. The system is keyed to our home systems, so only Windsor family members can access these elevators. I'll make sure we add your fingerprint back to my

house's security system tonight." He glances at me then, his expression hard. "Try not to abuse my trust this time."

An apology rests on the tip of my tongue, but I swallow it down and nod. "Does anyone other than Windsor family members have access?" I shouldn't ask, I know that, and it's likely he sees straight through me, but I need to know if he shared his home with someone else the way he did with me.

"No," he says, his tone gruff. "I learned my lesson the hard way and ensured my siblings don't make the same mistake. It's no longer possible to add someone to the system without two others signing off on it."

I nod and follow Zane out of the elevator and right into his office, where Mike is waiting for us. My eyes widen at the sight of his bright orange suit with purple stripes. "Ms. Harrison, it's so good to see you again," Mike says, holding up two mugs. "Espresso for you, Zane," he says, handing him the cup, before turning to me, "and an oat milk latte for you, Ms. Harrison."

"*Mrs. Windsor*," Zane says, his voice soft. "It's Mrs. Windsor now."

My eyes snap to his, and he stares at me in that way he used to, like I'm his and we both know it.

"Of course," Mike says. "I'd become so used to calling you Ms. Harrison that it just slipped out. Forgive me, Mrs. Windsor, not just for the slip of my tongue, but also for being unable to attend your wedding."

I nod and smile politely, suppressing the flutters in my stomach. *Mrs. Windsor*. I daydreamed about being called that for so long, but now it hardly feels real. "Please, just call me Celeste."

Mike grins and gestures toward the office. "Mr. and Mrs. Windsor, your grandparents are visiting in approximately five minutes, and I've been informed they're both en route. I have also been instructed to place another desk in this office."

He gestures behind him, and Zane and I follow his line of vision just as Grandma Anne walks in, my grandfather on her heels. They look like they've been arguing, but the moment they spot us, they instantly become a united front, exchanging looks I can't decipher. "Oh, good," she says, nodding at Mike. "This is exactly how I wanted it to be. You always read my mind, Mikey."

Mike beams at her, but Zane stares at his grandmother, his gaze tormented. "Don't do this to me," he says, his voice soft. "I already have to

put up with her being in my house. Don't make me share an office with her too. Isn't it enough that we're merging both companies?"

I flinch and look away, surprised by the force of his hatred. He truly doesn't want me anywhere near him. The only exception seems to be when our anger overflows, and we're too busy touching each other to care about anything else.

"No," Grandpa says. "It's not enough. I won't have you cut my granddaughter out of the decision-making processes. This is the quickest way for you both to adapt."

Zane glances at me, his gaze filled with undiluted distaste, and it makes me shrivel into myself. Despite that, I glower back at him and cross my arms. "I'm not particularly happy about this either," I snap, before turning on my heels and marching to my new desk. It's positioned so we're facing each other constantly, and somehow, that brings me a perverse sense of satisfaction. Now I know how much he hates seeing me in his office, I'm going to be here bright and early every single day.

Chapter Fifty-Four

ZANE

I walk into my office to find Celeste already sitting behind her desk, her beautiful face irritating me instantly. She looks up and throws me a sugary sweet smile that makes my heart skip a beat despite its fake nature. That's three days in a row she's beaten me to the office.

She's always still fast asleep when I slip out of bed, but in the time it takes me to either swim some laps or go to the gym, she gets ready and heads to the office without me. I glare at her as I walk to my desk, my steps heavier than necessary.

Living with her has been odd. Each time we're in the same room, the energy is charged with mutual hatred and unwanted desire that's so fucking hard to take. I slump into my seat, feeling completely worn out. I just want a little peace and quiet for at least a few hours a day, and I can't have that around her. Something inevitably happens, and she'll throw me a barbed insult or a veiled accusation that reopens old wounds. When I look at her, I just miss the woman that used to be mine.

"Mr. Windsor?"

I glance up to find Jill walking into my office, one of our senior interior designers. I smile at her politely and raise a brow.

"You urgently requested the final design plans for the new French restaurant on the ground floor of *The Lacara*," she says, walking around my

desk instead of standing in front of it. She places her tablet down and leans in, standing entirely too close.

I instantly look up at my wife, who's studying us with an expression that can only be described as *jealous*. It's surprisingly gratifying to see something other than hatred in her eyes. I smile at her politely, knowing how much she hates it when I do that, and turn back to Jill, who's angling her body to give me the best view of her cleavage. Nothing annoys me more than unprofessional behavior in my office, but this time, I let it slide. I may not want to argue with Celeste, but that doesn't mean I don't enjoy pissing her off.

"These are the two concepts you approved last time," she says, flicking through the 3D images on her tablet. "Which of the two would you like me to refine and finalize? I can take aspects from both and create something new too."

Her arm brushes against mine, and Celeste rises to her feet, startling Jill, who clearly hadn't noticed her hidden away behind her screen. "Let me see that," she says, marching over.

I bite back a smile when she moves between us and pushes against my chair to move me, making space for herself. "Oh," Jill says, pressing her tablet to her chest to hide it from Celeste. "These are highly confidential."

My wife's expression becomes beautifully stormy, and I watch her with barely suppressed delight. She's in another one of those tight pencil skirts of hers today, a black one this time, and I'm certain she does it to torment me. There's no way she doesn't realize how fucking good her ass looks in those damned skirts. Every time my attention wanders, I think of the way she'd moan for me if I bent her over my desk, and it's driving me wild.

"We haven't met," Celeste says, straightening her spine. "I'm Celeste Windsor, Zane's *wife*."

Celeste *Windsor*. Fuck. It sounds so good, especially in that sweet voice of hers. I thought she'd fight me, would refuse to take my name, but she signed the paperwork without any hesitation. It made me wonder if a small part of her also still wanted everything we once dreamed of.

This is the problem with her, with us. So long as I keep my distance, it's easy to remember all the reasons I hate her. But when she's standing so close to me, all I can think about is how much I still want her and how beautiful she is.

“Oh,” Jill says, visibly flustered. “I... I see... I’m sorry I didn’t recognize you, Mrs. Windsor.”

Celeste nods, seemingly placated. Fucking adorable. I smirk as I place my hand around my wife’s waist and pull her onto my lap. She gasps, and I wrap my arm around her, securing her against me. Bad move on my part, because it just makes that sexy round ass of hers press up against my cock, and in ten seconds, she’ll find out just how irresistible I find her skirts. “Sit,” I murmur, my tone not quite as unaffected as I’d have liked it to be. “There’s quite a lot to go over. You don’t want to be standing in those heels of yours the whole time.”

Celeste squirms, her chest rising and falling a little faster, and I grin as I place one hand on her stomach and the other on her thigh, just below the hem of her skirt. Jill looks shell-shocked and struggles to keep her composure, but truly, she only has herself to blame. If she hadn’t tried to flirt with me in the first place, she wouldn’t have found herself in this situation. What’s a man to do when his wife gets jealous? I have to reassure her, don’t I? I might not like Celeste very much right now, but I still can’t help myself.

I rest my chin on my wife’s shoulder and stare down at the tablet. “The two concepts are vastly different, but I like both.”

Celeste nods and flicks through the images, zooming in on different aspects as she shares her thoughts with me. I’d forgotten how in sync we are. “The Lacara is too modern of a hotel to pull off concept one,” she murmurs, lost in thought. “But I agree it suits the restaurant’s vibe. How about a fusion interior?”

Jill nods and begins to take notes, her gaze roaming over my face every few seconds, like she can’t believe I’m letting Celeste call the shots. In my quest to forget her, I became more of a workaholic than I’d have liked. Work was the only place where I still felt in control, yet somehow, giving that control up to my wife isn’t hard at all. “I like those lighting fixtures,” I murmur.

Celeste turns her head, her lips brushing against my cheek, and I feel the way her body tenses. My cock twitches, and she squeezes her thighs, tormenting me. “The ones in concept two, right?” she says, before turning back to the tablet.

I smile to myself and tilt my face a little to press my nose to her neck, loving her scent. It’s a mixture these days — no longer just honey and

vanilla. I can smell my custom blended body wash on her now, and it's got me curious. I've seen the dozens of little bottles that appeared in my bathroom, yet she's using my body wash. There's something infinitely sexy about it, and I draw a shaky breath as I imagine her in my shower, thinking of me as she envelops herself in my signature scent. I grip her thigh tightly, my cock throbbing as the images assault me, stealing away all my attention. She squeezes her legs together, and fuck, I'm so tempted to rock back and forth, to create a little more friction.

"Zane?" she breathes, and I glance at her, enjoying the way her cheeks are perfectly rosy. I just know that if I slip my fingers between her legs right now, I'll find her wet for me. Knowing I want her desperately always turned her on, and I doubt that's changed. "What do you think of that? I like this combination, but you'll need to approve it too."

I nod as she begins to run me through all the various aspects she chose from each design. "You can have anything you want," I cut her off.

She tilts her head to look at me and smiles. "Anything?" I nod, my breathing labored. "Thank you, Zane," she says before pressing a kiss to my cheek, startling me. The gesture is so sweet it completely disarms me, reminding me of the way she used to smile up at me and kiss my face randomly as we both worked at night, distracting me until I was buried deep inside her on my sofa.

"I'm excited about this," she tells Jill, who's staring at me in disbelief. I suppose it's odd to see me like this — completely at my wife's mercy, when I've always been cutthroat and professional.

She nods politely and walks out of our office with a surprised but pleasant expression, like she's happy with the progress she so quickly made with her designs, thanks to Celeste. The door falls closed, and Celeste tenses.

"What was that?" she asks, trying to push off me.

I hold her tighter and slide my hand up her thigh, underneath her skirt. "Indeed. What was that, Celeste?" I ask, my fingertips riding up slowly. She presses her legs together, a soft whimper on her lips. "You were jealous, weren't you?"

She gasps, a denial no doubt on the tip of her tongue. I steal it away by trailing my fingers over her soaking silky underwear. She moans when I push the fabric aside and drag my index finger right up to her clit. "No," she whimpers. "I wasn't... wasn't jealous."

I chuckle and lean in, my teeth grazing her earlobe. “Liar,” I whisper, before pinching her clit softly, teasingly. She’s so fucking slippery, and fuck, I wish I could just bury my face between her legs right now. I’m so close to begging for it.

Celeste grips the edge of my desk and rises to her feet, wrenching herself away from me. I frown in confusion, certain she wanted this as much as I do. She straightens her skirt and takes a few steps away, her cheeks flushed beautifully.

“Is that how it started, Zane?” she asks, her eyes clearing of every last trace of lust. “With Lily. While you spent your evenings with me... were your days like this?”

My eyes widen, my shield dropping back into place as I grab my handkerchief from my suit pocket and wipe my fingers. I look up at her once I’ve regained my composure, my gaze level. “Does my answer even matter?”

Chapter Fifty-Five

ZANE

I sigh as I check my watch, noting the late hour. Normally, I'd already be in bed by ten, but these days, I often don't even make it home until eleven. The only way I can ignore Celeste is when I'm not anywhere near her. She continuously provokes me at work, fighting with me over assets, hiring decisions, and even small details, like the way the slides for our next proposal should look. I'm not sure if she's just trying to get on my nerves, but if she is, she's definitely succeeding.

Three weeks of marriage, and I'm ready to walk away from everything if it means we'd stop fighting. She makes it so clear that she hates me, and at work that's easier to deal with — at the office it's easier to remind myself of all the harm she caused my company, only for it all to fall into her hands anyway. It's inside our home that the lines blur, and my heart begins to guide me in a direction I won't take. She fucking torments me, every single second of every fucking day.

I run a hand through my hair as I walk into the living room, only to freeze in surprise when she looks up at me from the sofa, where she's lying back with a book in her hands, a sexy red nightgown riding up her body. Something tender tugs at me when I realize it's the latest book in the endless series of romance fantasy novels that Sierra, Raven, and she'd been reading. Does she know Sierra and Raven still read them too? I got them

both advance copies of the one she's got in her hands right now, and each time I bribed the author, I thought of Celeste.

She tenses when I walk up to her, but she pulls her legs back to make space for me on the sofa. I hesitate for a split second before sitting down and grabbing the remote. I've been watching TV in here every evening, waiting for her to fall asleep before I join her in our bed. Somehow, going to bed with her is too hard for me, it makes the regret feel too heavy, the loss too debilitating. I usually stay here until I doze off and end up waking up again at around three in the morning.

She normally barely leaves the bedroom when she's home, so I'm not sure why she's here now. Did she figure out this is where I spend my evenings? Is this another attempt to annoy me? I sigh as I browse through the channels, knowing I won't be able to focus on anything anyway — I never do. I end up thinking about her in my bed, wishing things were the way they used to be, and then I grab my laptop to drown her out with work.

Celeste's feet brush against my thigh, and I glance down at her bright purple nail polish, wondering what she's wearing tonight. It's a cute habit I always loved, the way she'd frequently change her nail polish based on her mood.

She jumps when I grab her feet and place them in my lap, so she can lie back the way she did when I walked in. Neither of us says anything as I begin to massage her feet the way I used to, my thumbs circling the arch of her foot. She sighs happily, and I try my hardest not to react. For five years, I didn't want anyone, yet the one woman my mind doesn't want, my body can't resist.

I see Celeste turn the page from the corner of my eye, and she repositions herself, the angle of her legs exposing her matching silk panties. I bite down on my lip as I imagine the way they'll darken as I soak them through, and something twisted takes hold of me — a deep need to show her that despite all that hatred she throws at me, she still wants me too.

I stop massaging her feet and drape my left hand over her ankles while the other reaches for the remote again. She repositions herself, a soft gasp escaping her lips when her foot brushes against my cock. I tense, waiting to see what she'll do, and sure enough, she rubs my cock slowly, the movement so subtle I'd have thought it was an accident if I didn't know her so well.

I lean back on the sofa, my left hand drawing circles across the parts of her legs I can reach, almost absentmindedly. Celeste sighs and pushes against my cock harder, demanding my attention. I turn to look at her and raise a brow provocatively. If she wants something, she'll have to ask for it.

Her gaze meets mine, and fuck, I'm enchanted. Seeing my wife spread out on our sofa in that silky red nightgown that clings to her body, the shape of her nipples visible through the fabric... It's ridden up to her hips, her panties now clearly visible, and I don't think I've ever been this tempted. Her book is now forgotten, its pages pressed against her stomach as she looks at me.

I lift my hand off her and drape it across the back of the sofa instead, putting the ball in her court. Getting involved with her again will do me no good, but I also can't resist her when she looks like *that*. Her foot rubs my cock purposely now, almost painfully so, and I need to get out of these fucking suit pants. I need her to touch me.

"Where were you?" she asks, her voice needy. "Where are you every night, Zane? You leave work before I do, and I don't see you at home at all."

I clench my jaw and stare her down, my heart aching. The distrust in her eyes is obvious, and it hurts, but it fucking enrages me too. I take a calming breath and grab her ankle with my right hand, leaving my other hand on the sofa. Her breath hitches when I bring her foot to my lips and kiss the side of it, before turning my head toward her and kissing her just above her ankle.

"Answer me," she demands, her voice wavering.

I press another kiss to her skin, moving up her leg. "I won't," I tell her, before turning my torso to lean over her and kiss the inside of her thigh. My hand wraps around her knee tightly as I nip at her soft skin. "Just who do you think you are, Celeste? Just because you're my wife on paper doesn't mean you have any rights to me. I don't owe you any explanations, not anymore."

Her expression hardens as she hooks her leg around my waist. In one smooth move, she's in my lap, straddling me as she steadies herself with her hands on my shoulders, her book falling to the floor in the process. "You're wrong," she tells me, her tone threatening. "You're *mine*, Zane. For the next three years, you're mine." Her fingers thread through my hair, and she forces me to face her, her gaze demanding and desperate.

I grab her waist and hold on tight. “I warned you,” I tell her. “I told you not to interfere in my private business.”

Pain flashes across her face, and every instinct tells me to take back the words. Her eyes fill with betrayal, followed by the sheen of tears, and it fucking guts me. “Who is she?” she asks, her voice breaking. “Who are you having dinner with while I sit here in your house, all alone? Who do you cook for these days, Zane?” A tear runs down her cheek, and I catch it with my thumb. I cup her face gently and sigh, all my anger draining away instantly. “I feel like I’m going crazy wondering,” she tells me, her voice breaking.

I drop my forehead to hers and swallow hard, my heart beating wildly. “Sierra on Mondays, Lex on Tuesdays, Luca and Val on Wednesdays, Ares and Raven on Thursdays, and Faye and Dion on Fridays. Saturdays you spend at your parents’ house, so I’m at home then, and on Sundays, I’m at my grandmother’s house. She’s actually warned me a few times now that I have to bring you with me, but I’ve just been ignoring her requests.”

She looks into my eyes, her gaze searching, a hint of suspicion taking root in her beautiful ambers. “Even if you do have dinner with them, you don’t... you never come to bed until late.”

Anger runs down my spine, and I grab her hips before flipping us over. She gasps when her back hits the sofa, and I settle on top of her, my legs between hers. I grab her wrists and pin them above her head, flames of fury licking at me. “So your first thought is that I must be cheating on you, is that it?”

She looks at me with the same anger burning in her eyes. “It wouldn’t be the first time.”

I grit my teeth and lean in to nip at her bottom lip, my touch punishing. She freezes for a moment, and then she kisses me, her legs wrapping around my hips as she opens up for me, her tongue teasing, lapping. I moan and drag my lips off hers and down to her neck. “You’re fucking insane, you know that?” I murmur, before sucking down harshly, wanting to fucking own her. “I’ll never want anyone but you, Celeste. I never have.”

I drive my cock into her and push myself up enough to look at her. “Do you feel that, Celeste? Do you feel how fucking hard you make me, even when you piss me off to no end?” She bites down on her lip, her gaze surprisingly vulnerable. “Only you can do that to me, Celestial. *Only you.*”

No matter what phase of our lives we're in, no matter what's going on or how much I fucking hate you — I only ever want you."

I've told her this so many times, and five years ago, I broke down and begged her to believe me, repeating the words over and over. I swore to myself I never would again when she walked away, yet here I am, once more desperate to take away her insecurities. I hate the power she holds over me. Fuck, I hate the way I still love her, despite everything.

I let go of her wrists and let my hand run down her body, cupping her breast. She gasps and reaches for me, her fingers trailing over the edge of my face before she pulls me closer, her lips finding mine with newfound desperation. I groan when she kisses me, her legs tightening around me, like she wants me closer. Celeste's hands explore my body, tugging on my tie first, before rapidly abandoning that cause in favor of undoing my pants. I suck her bottom lip in between my teeth as she frees my cock and firmly wraps her hand around it.

I tear my mouth off hers to look at her, holding myself up on my forearms. We shouldn't do this, but I can't stop either, not when she looks at me like she needs me to prove something to her. Celeste looks up at me pleadingly as she pushes her underwear aside and guides my cock to where she wants it.

I inhale sharply at the hot wet feel of her, unable to resist slipping the tip in. She moans so beautifully, her eyes never leaving mine as I push another inch into her, my body and mind at war.

"For once, you're right about something, Celeste." Curiosity flickers through her eyes, before lust drowns it out when I push into her further. "I've always been yours," I whisper, before thrusting forward and burying myself deep inside my wife.

Chapter Fifty-Six

ZANE

“No,” Celeste says, crossing her arms as she leans back in her desk chair, staring me down. “I want to keep that hotel in our portfolio. This is a merger — you don’t get to pick and choose by yourself. We’ll decide together.”

I mirror her posture and glare at her. Nothing has changed between us since that moment we shared on the sofa at home a few weeks ago. I’ve kept staying out late, and she hasn’t brought it up since, both of us pretending that night never happened.

She’s a little easier to read now, though. It took me a little while to figure it out, but I now realize that when too much time passes without me giving her anything but my professional self, she gets agitated and begins to argue with me at work. Shortly after we slept together, we worked as efficiently as we used to, back when I thought we’d build a fucking empire together. As the weeks pass without us having a personal conversation, without seeing each other much at home, her attitude changes, and she begins to cross me just to get a reaction. It used to frustrate me when she became so difficult to work with, but now it just amuses me. She wants my attention, and she doesn’t even realize it, wouldn’t ever admit it.

“I do get to choose, since I’m the one that has to fund this shitty loss-making hotel of yours.”

She rises to her feet and leans forward, her palms flat on her desk. She's so beautiful when her eyes flash like that, her long curly hair framing her body. She's in a black dress today, and all morning, I've been wondering what's underneath. "Last I checked, I was your *wife*," she tells me, her tone threatening. I love it when she reminds me of that little fact, which she does more and more often these days. "What's yours is mine, and I'm funding this."

I bite back a smile. "Not without my signature, you're not."

She walks around her desk, her long legs on display for me, and fuck, they'd look so pretty spread on my desk. Something in her gaze shifts when she realizes I'm checking her out, and I school my features, refusing to give her what she's after. Each day, it becomes harder to keep my distance, but today isn't the day I'll fail. "I'll go over your head," she tells me, placing her knee between my legs, on the edge of my seat. I'm so tempted to grab her and make her ride my cock in that sexy dress of hers, but I don't.

"Try me. You won't like the consequences. I haven't touched any of the assets you told me had sentimental value, but this one you just want to keep for the hell of it. I'm not having it."

She places her hands on my shoulders, and I lean back, simply watching her and resisting the urge to hold her waist. It annoys her when I don't touch her. It's become my favorite thing to do — watch her get riled up and storm over to me. She'll run her hands all over me, in supposed anger, and the longer I resist touching her back, the angrier she gets. It's fucking beautiful. "So if I tell you it has sentimental value, you'll let me have it?"

My eyes flash at her words. She knows exactly what she's doing, my crazy wife. She slides her knee forward slowly until she's grazing my cock. "Will you let me have it, Zane?"

I run a hand through my hair, unable to hide how fucking hard she makes me when her knee presses against me like that. She smiles victoriously, and for a moment, I wonder if we could make it after all. She still wants me, that much is clear. Is there any way we could overcome the past like our grandparents hope we will? Can we learn to trust each other again? She nearly single-handedly destroyed everything I built, and I barely survived it the first time.

"No," I tell her. My hands wrap around her waist, and I gently push her away.

Celeste's eyes widen, confusion and a tinge of hurt flickering through them. "Why? If we restored it, it could easily become profitable."

I shake my head and roll my chair backward, creating more distance between us. Her expression shutters closed and she crosses her arms, something decidedly vulnerable about her posture. "Even so, there are better things we can invest in. This property no longer suits our brand, and we'd have a higher return investing in something else. You know that as well as I do, Celeste."

Her gaze roams over my face, and she studies me carefully for a moment. "You're right," she says, surprising me. She buries a hand in her hair and draws a shaky breath, her eyes falling closed for a moment. When she opens them again, she has the same blank and professional look on her face that she gives everyone else. It instantly makes my heart ache, and it hits me then — is this what it feels like for her when I act the same way?

"I apologize, Zane," she says, her arms falling to her side. "I'm not sure what I was thinking." I can't tell what she's apologizing for, the bad investment call, or the way she just touched me. Perhaps it's both.

She turns and takes a step away, but I grab her wrist and hold her in place. Celeste freezes and looks over her shoulder, her brow raised. "You can have it," I tell her, the words escaping my lips before I've had a chance to truly think them through. "The hotel. If you want it, it's yours."

She blinks at me in confusion, but then the biggest smile transforms her face, and something akin to hope sparkles in her eyes. Fucking hell. I caved. *Again*. In this battle of wills, I'll always lose, because it means seeing her smile like that.

"No," she murmurs, her tone so fucking sweet. "It's okay. You're right, Zane. It's not a good investment. We should get rid of it."

I smile back at her, my heart beating faster than it did moments ago. She's an addiction in the making, one I barely managed to kick the first time. Celeste is dangerous to me, but fuck, no matter how hard I fight, it's a losing battle.

I let go of her wrist when my phone rings, a frown making its way onto my face as I pick it up. "Hello?"

"Zane," Clara says. I look up at Celeste, whose gaze flickers with curiosity. "You owe me an apology."

My eyes widen, and I grip my phone with both hands. "What happened?" I ask my mother-in-law, slightly panicked. "What did I do?"

“You’ve been married to my daughter for over two months, and you haven’t come to the Saturday cooking classes I’ve been inviting you to. If I hear one more weird excuse, I’ll come drag you over myself. Am I making myself clear?”

I clear my throat and sit up straight, angling away from Celeste. “I promise this is the first I’m hearing of this,” I explain, my tone eager to placate her. “I would never turn down a request to visit you. I’m really sorry this happened.”

Clara falls silent for a moment, and then she huffs. “*Celeste*,” she snaps. “She never told you, did she?”

“No, I’m afraid not.”

Clara sighs. “Is she with you?”

“Yes.”

She chuckles, and I can’t help but smile back. “Very well. Let’s see what excuse she’ll give me this time then. My daughter is about to find out what happens when she lies to me. I expect you to be there on Saturday morning, and you’re spending the night. Understood?”

I chuckle and look out the window as I imagine the angry, motherly look on her face. I missed her. While Celeste and I dated, she was the closest thing to a mother I had, and though I’m reluctant to admit it, I’d hoped we could repair our relationship. “Understood,” I tell her. “I’ll see you on Saturday.”

She ends the call, and Celeste stands rooted in place, her arms crossed. I take in my wife, noting the anger and insecurity in her gaze. This is why it could never work between us, because when we fell apart, we broke the solid foundation that made us who we were.

Chapter Fifty-Seven

CELESTE

“What’s wrong, honey?” Mom asks, her gaze searching. I shake my head and peel what has to be the hundredth potato. Mom’s working me much harder today than ever before, and with each potato I peel, I get more cranky.

“Yeah, you’re even more annoying than usual,” Archer says over video, standing in his own kitchen.

“*Nothing’s* wrong,” I snap. I can’t stop wondering where Zane is, and who he was speaking to on the phone a few days ago. He sounded so sweet, so caring, and the way it made me feel was unprecedented. It wasn’t mere jealousy, it made me feel... like an intruder, I suppose. The genuine affection in his voice put me in my place more than anything else could have.

I’d felt pathetic, standing there, listening in on a conversation that wasn’t meant for my ears. Every day since, wild theories have occupied my mind. He keeps telling me that he never cheated, that he never would, when I already have evidence to the contrary. I knew he’d do it again, and I feel like I’m losing myself in a quest to figure out who it is this time. I’m scared to want him, scared I’ll miss the signs again, and it’s driving me crazy.

I pull myself together when the door opens and Dad walks in, his voice jovial. My finger slips when I spot Zane right behind him, carrying yet another sack of potatoes. I hiss in pain as the peeler presses against my skin,

nicking me. A small drop of blood wells at the tip of my finger, and Zane drops the bag he was holding.

“For God’s sake, Celeste. Can’t you be more careful?” he snaps, before rushing up to me and taking my hand, his gaze concerned as he lifts my finger and sucks down on it.

I stare at him in shock. “What are you doing here?” I ask, my tone aggrieved.

He raises a brow and pulls my finger away to look at it, pleased that the bleeding stopped. “When my mother-in-law demands I come visit, I obey. Unlike you, I have a healthy amount of self-preservation skills.”

Guilt crashes through me, followed quickly by understanding, and then relief. He smiles at me knowingly, and I glare at him in return. He knew, didn’t he? He knew I’d be jealous. Zane leans in, his lips brushing against my ear. “You’d better think twice before you get me in trouble with your mother again,” he warns, before grazing my ear with his teeth, his touch punishing.

“Hey!” Archer shouts. “Step the fuck away from my sister, asshole. Don’t do that shit in my house.”

Zane pulls away and reaches over to press the mute button, making Mom laugh. “Zane,” she admonishes. “Unmute your brother-in-law, will you?” Her hand wraps around his arm, an indulgent look in her eyes.

Dad just frowns at the screen and shakes his head. “I could’ve just muted him all this time?” he asks, shocked. Archer rages on the screen, no doubt cursing Zane endlessly, and I burst out laughing, my heart overflowing with something I haven’t felt in so long — *happiness*.

Zane stares at me, his gaze filled with wonder, and his hand wraps around my waist, a sweet smile on his face. I lean against him without thinking, wanting to savor this moment — it’s just like how it used to be, when we’d come here together on Saturdays once my parents finally accepted our relationship. I didn’t realize how much I’ve missed it, this carefree feeling.

Mom rolls her eyes when Zane ignores her command and reaches over to unmute Archer. “Not a word,” she warns him, and he presses his lips together, his eyes flashing with anger. I catch Zane smirking at my brother from the corner of my eye, and it makes my heart beat a little faster. I know Archer was hurt by the way their friendship fell apart, but looking at them

now makes me wonder whether some of the damage can be undone over time. It gives me hope that I shouldn't feel.

"Let me do this," Zane says, taking the peeler from me. I look up at him, startled out of my thoughts. Longing hits me hard and fast, and for a moment, I wonder whether Lily was right when she said there's nothing I won't forgive Zane for.

"No," Mom cuts in. "She had the guts to lie to me about inviting you, so she'll cut every single potato in this house."

I part my lips in shock and hold up one of my shoddily peeled potatoes. "So it's his fault I have to do this?" I ask, outraged. I slam it down and glare at Zane. He merely grins back at me, his expression telling me he's unfazed by my anger, a little amused even.

"No," Mom snaps. "It's *your* fault. I should've caught on when you told me he had to gather fresh fertilizer from the farm for his observatory."

Zane raises his brow and tightens his grip on me, pulling me closer as he tilts his head toward me. "*What the fuck, Celeste?*" he whispers, but not quite soft enough, because Mom nods and places both of her palms flat on the counter.

"Yes. She told me you had your own cows, and you—"

"—I'll cut them," I interrupt, holding up a potato. "I'll cut them, okay? All of them."

Archer bursts out laughing, and I see my dad try his hardest to suppress a smile too. I was starting to run out of excuses as to why Zane couldn't join us, and since Mom never really questioned my answers, I'd begun to get a little more... creative. Never in a million years did I think this would ever come up.

"Darling," Zane mumbles, his voice low, threatening. "Tell me you didn't insinuate that I couldn't come over because I was too busy gathering *cow shit*."

I cough awkwardly, my cheeks flaming. "I would never," I say as I look up at him, trying my hardest to look innocent. His gaze roams over my face, pausing on my lips for a moment, before he drags them back to my eyes. He looks at me the way he used to, like he finds me adorable, and it makes my heart race.

"She absolutely did," Dad says, and my lips part in shock.

I tear my eyes off Zane to glare at my father, who merely smiles back at me. "*Dad*," I huff, my tone conveying my sense of betrayal. Dad laughs,

and I smile back involuntarily, surprised by his lightheartedness. Our relationship became strained once I got engaged to Clifton, but he seems back to normal now, and I can't quite pinpoint why. Between the two of them, it's Zane he should like least, but that doesn't seem to be the case.

Zane's shoulder brushes against mine, and he shakes his head as he grabs a potato and peels it effortlessly. I throw an annoyed glare his way when I realize how much quicker and better he is at the task, and he chuckles, his gaze filled with affection. He hasn't looked at me that way in years, and it makes my heart ache in the strangest way.

We work together in silence for a few minutes, and it isn't until we run out of potatoes that I realize my parents are sneaking looks at us every few seconds, their gazes curious.

"How about a drink before dinner, Zane?" Dad says.

Something transpires wordlessly between the two of them, and Zane puts down his peeler, his shoulders tensing. "Of course," he says, forcing a smile.

I frown as I watch my husband walk away, curiosity clawing at me. "Leave it be," Mom warns, handing me another potato. I take it from her wordlessly, a hint of unease running down my spine as I wonder what that was all about.

Chapter Fifty-Eight

ZANE

“We should get going,” Celeste says as she rises from the sofa, where we’ve been playing an electronic card game, so Archer can play too.

“No,” Clara says, her brow raised. “You’re staying over.”

Celeste’s eyes snap to mine, and something akin to discomfort flashes in them, almost like she feels bad for me. “Oh, um, I don’t think that’s a good idea,” she says hesitantly. “Zane has plans tomorrow.”

My mother-in-law looks at me then, her expression daring me to break my promise. “You’re staying over, aren’t you?” she asks, her tone sharp.

“Yes, ma’am, as agreed.”

“And you don’t have plans, do you?”

I shake my head. “Not until the evening. I’ll have to go over to my grandmother’s house for dinner, but otherwise, I’m free.”

Clara crosses her arms and stares Celeste down, her brow raised. I suppress a smile when my wife throws me a helpless look. I merely shrug, not having forgotten the cow shit story. “Come to think of it,” Clara says. “I have a bunch of onions that need peeling. Sounds like an excellent task for tomorrow, Celeste, since you don’t have plans and all.”

My wife’s shoulders sag in defeat, and she throws me a hateful look that just turns me on. “Yes, Mom.”

“Take Zane up,” Clara orders. “He worked so hard today, helping with all of that food prep. I’m sure he’d like to get some rest. The freezer is filled

for months thanks to him, after all.”

Celeste stares at her mother openmouthed and throws her hand up in a *what the hell* gesture, both of us well aware she did the majority of the work. I can’t help but smile at that cute, outraged expression of hers and her beautifully flushed cheeks. “My pleasure,” I tell Clara as I rise to my feet, adding fuel to the fire.

Celeste glares at me before storming out of the living room, and I grin as I follow her, finding her particularly adorable tonight. She leads me upstairs, and my smile melts away as I remember all the times I’ve been here before — every stolen kiss, all the sneaking around because we couldn’t stay away from each other for even one single night.

I instinctively turn to the right at the landing, toward the guest room, and she grabs my wrist, her eyes meeting mine. “We’re married,” she whispers, pulling me in the direction of her bedroom. I raise a brow, remembering her father’s scrutiny and the countless spot checks he’d done in the first few weeks, worried I was ravaging his daughter behind his back — which I was.

My heart races as I quietly follow her to her room, a hint of nerves settling in the pit of my stomach. I haven’t gone to bed with her since we got married. Something about it feels too intimate, and it’s hard enough to keep the boundaries between us intact these days.

She glances over her shoulder as she pulls me into her room, her hand still wrapped around my wrist, like she’s scared I won’t follow her if she doesn’t make me. The door closes behind us, and my eyes zero in on my overnight bag on her desk. I’d put it in the guest room earlier, but someone clearly moved it, and judging by her surprise, I don’t think it was Celeste.

I lean back against her door and cross my arms, inadvertently pulling my wrist out of her reach. “You have some explaining to do, my darling wife.”

She turns to face me, and I’m instantly fucking captivated by the blush that’s coloring her face rosy. “I... um... about what?”

I narrow my eyes and suppress a smile when she throws me a cutesy innocent look that’s so familiar it hurts. “Cow shit, huh?”

“About that,” she says, her voice high-pitched. “I... um... I can definitely explain.”

“Yeah?” I’m curious what kind of tale she’ll spin. She picked this habit up from Sierra back in the day — making up wild but oddly believable

stories when she's trying to get out of something. It's kind of endearing that she still does that.

Celeste laughs nervously and pushes a curl behind her ear. "I mean, I don't know, it just kind of made sense?"

I grab her hand and pull her against me before turning us over, so I've got her pushed up against the door. "Yeah?" I murmur, my face hovering over hers. She feels so soft against me, so *perfect*. "How exactly did it make sense that I'd buy cows just to harvest fresh manure from them?" I try my hardest not to let my amusement show, but fuck, it's hard. This is how I fell for her the first time, and I can feel it happening all over again. "What other lies did you tell your mom about me, huh?"

She tries her hardest to bite back a smile, and then she bursts out laughing, unable to contain it. The sound of her joy makes my heart race, and my hands wrap around her wrists, pinning them above her head, unable to keep from smiling in return. "That funny, huh?"

She nods, her chest pressing against mine. She's breathing as hard as I am, and for a couple of seconds, it's easy to just exist in this moment. "I told her you select all the manure personally and have a whole process to choose the ones you wanted for your greenhouse."

She giggles, and I drop my forehead to hers, my own smile breaking free. "Crazy girl.". My nose brushes against hers, and her laughter trails off, her breath hitching. She tenses and tilts her face, making her lips brush against mine before pulling back, like she moved instinctively and caught herself in time. I swallow hard, my lips hovering over hers. It'd be so easy to kiss her, but fuck, we can't keep doing this. I'll never be able to walk away from her if I keep giving in.

I let go of her wrists and step back, but before I can put more space between us, her hand wraps around mine, keeping me in place. I glance at our entwined fingers before raising my eyes to look at her. Her gaze is filled with a deep need, one I'm desperate to fulfill, and despite my best attempts, I can't look away.

Celeste takes a step closer, bridging the distance I'd created. Her free hand slides up my chest and around the back of my neck, her gaze pleading as she rises to her tiptoes. I exhale shakily when her lips brush against mine hesitantly, once, twice, before her hand slides up my nape and into my hair. I groan when she kisses me softly, her touch filled with tenderness and regret. I can't fucking resist her — I never could. She moans when I bury a

hand in her curls and kiss her back, my touch rough, tinged with anger. Even after all these years, I can't deny her, and it drives me mad.

Celeste's hand slips out of mine, and she leans back to look at me, her breathing erratic as she places both palms on my chest, her touch warm through the fabric of my shirt. I suck in a breath when her fingers move to the button at the top. She undoes it, her gaze heated. I'm spellbound as she makes her way down, my heart beating wildly.

I don't snap out of it until she's halfway through, and my hands wrap around hers, keeping them in place. "You don't know what you're doing," I whisper, my voice trembling.

She looks up at me from lowered lashes, her gaze heated. "I do," she promises, but she can't possibly. I let go of her hands, and she finishes unbuttoning my shirt. It falls open, and she places her trembling palm in the middle of my chest, her touch caressing as she moves it down.

Celeste inhales shakily as she grabs the collars and pushes the fabric off my shoulders, only to freeze at the sight of the tattoo over my heart, the one I've kept hidden from her. Her eyes widen as she takes in the goddess that bears a striking resemblance to her, her wings pitch dark and corrupted. "What is this?" she whispers, tracing my tattoo with the tip of her fingers.

"My biggest regret."

Her gaze snaps to mine, agony flickering through her eyes as she slides her hand around the back of my neck. She hesitates for a beat, and then she pulls me closer, her lips finding mine. I groan as I take what she's offering, ignoring every red flag.

I grab her waist to lift her up, needing her closer, and she wraps her legs around my hips instantly. Celeste's fingers thread through my hair as she kisses me, her touch impatient, desperate.

Her body moves against mine as she opens up for me, her touch telling me everything she won't. My wife tears off my shirt entirely as I carry her to her bed, and my hands slip underneath her dress. She tightens her legs around me and holds up her arms, helping me get it off. "*Fuck*," I groan when I see the beautiful white lace she's wearing underneath. Her lips find mine again, her touch urgent, like nothing else matters.

I sit down on her bed with her still on my lap, and she pushes me backward, her gaze trailing back to my tattoo. "So that's why you always stay half-dressed," she whispers as she leans over me and kisses my chest. I inhale sharply and grab her ass, kneading and teasing, my touch rough.

Celeste continues to kiss me, slowly moving up my chest, the way she used to. It's fucking intoxicating. She nips at a sensitive part of my neck, and I moan, unable to help myself.

She does it again, and I bury a hand in her hair, fisting it roughly. "Fucking tease," I groan. She laughs and sits up, her legs spread across my abs. I can feel how wet she is right through her panties, and it's driving me wild. Celeste looks into my eyes, her gaze filled with tenderness and something that looks a whole lot like a deep kind of longing, something that extends beyond the physical.

She looks into my eyes as she reaches behind her and undoes her bra, letting it fall away. "*Fuck.*" I stare at her, enchanted, and the look in her eyes tells me she knows exactly what she's doing to me.

I grab her and turn us over impatiently, enjoying the way she gasps as her back hits the bed. She bites down on her lip when I hook my fingers around the waistband of her panties, her breathing erratic as I slowly drag them off. Five years, and I don't think I've ever wanted her more.

I suck in a breath when I finally have her fully naked, for the first time in years. She's fucking ethereal, my beautiful Celestial. "You too," she pleads, and I smirk as I rush out of my suit pants, throwing them on top of her clothes before kneeling between her legs.

My wife whimpers when her eyes land on my cock, and satisfaction rushes through me when she wraps her legs around my waist and tries to pull me closer. "So impatient," I murmur, even as I give in and settle on top of her, pressing against her teasingly.

She squirms underneath me, her hands roaming over my back. "Please," she begs, and I drop my forehead to hers. She threads her hands through my hair and pulls my lips back to hers, her touch near reverent. I kiss her slowly, sliding up against her continuously, coating my cock in her wetness. Her legs tangle with mine, and she moans my name as I slip into her, taking her hard.

"Such a perfect pussy," I whisper against her mouth, and she rolls her hips, drawing an involuntary moan from my throat. "Fuck yeah," I groan, grabbing her thighs tightly.

Celeste raises her hips and flips us over, catching me by surprise. She chuckles as she climbs back on top of me, her eyes on mine as she grabs my cock and slowly sinks down on it. That look of pure delight on her face nearly fucking undoes me.

“Ride me,” I tell her. “Ride your husband, Celeste. Fuck me.”

Her pussy squeezes me tightly in response, and I groan, fucking desperate for her. Pure possessiveness crosses her face as she begins to move on top of me, and right there and then, I know. I’m fucking doomed, because even after all these years, all the heartache and pain, I still want her as much as I always have, and this feeling will never go away. It’ll always be her.

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Chapter Fifty-Nine

CELESTE

Zane wraps his arm around me, pulling me closer in his sleep, and I sigh happily as I bury my face against his chest, my fingers trailing over his tattoo. It's me. The more I look at it, the more obvious it becomes. What was he thinking when he tattooed that over his heart?

I'm not even sure what I am in his eyes — it looks like he depicted me as a goddess, but the black wings make me look like a fallen angel. This tattoo has to be at least a few years old, and it raises more questions that I don't dare ask.

Being around him again, when I'm not drowning in grief, is more confusing than ever. I'm second-guessing myself every time he looks at me like he misses me, every time he tries to put distance between us despite the longing in his eyes. As the weeks pass, his anger and hatred seem to have faded, leaving only deep-rooted pain in his gaze.

I don't understand what happened between us, and each time we discussed it, my mind was too grief-stricken to truly listen. No matter how many times we spoke about it, he'd deny all of Lily's accusations, even though her diary proved otherwise. To this day, he refuses to admit what Lily told me on The King's Bridge, and I'm no longer as steadfast in my conviction as I used to be. Doubt is starting to creep in, and it's swiftly followed by guilt. I so badly want his words to be true, but if they are, that

would mean my best friend lied to me. It isn't possible — she'd never lie to me only to take her own life. It doesn't make any sense.

Zane's hand slides down my waist, and he sighs as he begins to stir. His eyes flutter open, and he smiles at me. My heart beats wildly, and I draw a shaky breath, wanting this moment to last forever but knowing it won't.

He blinks a few times before abruptly sitting up, the sheets bunching around his waist as he runs a hand through his hair, his gaze roaming over my childhood bedroom and the trail of clothes around us. Zane's eyes fall closed, and I watch as his entire body tenses, every drop of tenderness melting away as his shields click back into place.

I miss him. I didn't even realize how much until last night. "Zane," I whisper, sitting up and holding up the blankets to cover my bare body.

He glances at me, his gaze unreadable. "We should go home. I have some work to do before I head over to my grandmother's."

It's odd to hear him sound so... *distant* after the way he looked at me last night. Regret is written all over his face, and he sighs as he turns to get out of bed. I grab his arm, letting the covers fall off my chest as I hold on to him. His entire body tenses, and he glances at my hands, mild irritation in his gaze. "I'll come with you," I tell him. "To your grandmother's house."

Surprise flickers through his eyes, and some of the tension eases from his shoulders. "You will?"

I nod. "You mentioned it was becoming harder to make up excuses, right? We can't spend the next three years like this. I... I think it might be better if we..." Nerves dance across my skin, and he raises a brow as he waits for me to finish my sentence. "Let's pretend," I end up saying, unable to craft the right words out of my thoughts and feelings.

"Pretend?"

"Our families are worried about us, so I thought... well... wouldn't it be easier if we show them what they want to see? I appreciate what you did for me yesterday with my parents, and if I can, I'd like to do the same for you. I know you find this hard to believe, but I don't want to always be fighting with you."

He studies my face carefully and sighs. "Celeste," he murmurs as he reaches for my duvet and wraps it around my shoulders, shielding my body from his view. "I don't know. It's not a bad idea, I suppose. Three years is quite a long time, and the last thing I want to do is worry everyone around us. It's just..."

He looks away and musses his hair. I tear my gaze off his torso, feeling strangely flustered. Something about this moment feels so intimate, even after everything we did last night.

“What is it?” I whisper.

He sighs and lies back down, his eyes on mine. “You hurt my siblings more than you could possibly know. I never told the boys what you did to me, Celeste, because I didn’t think they could take it. They loved you with all they had, and you abandoned them. I get why, but they don’t. From their point of view, we broke up in the worst way, and you cut them out of your life despite their best attempts to hold on. They would have, you know? They loved you so much they’d have stayed friends with you even though you broke my heart, because they never knew any of the details, they didn’t know about the way you betrayed me.”

Fresh grief hits me in waves, and I bite down on my lip, unable to face him. There’s so much I regret about what I did five years ago, but hurting them ranks highest on that list.

“I’m worried about reintroducing you to their lives, because in three years, they’ll lose you all over again. I don’t want them to see you as my wife, as one of us. That place... someday, it’ll belong to someone else, and when I eventually find someone I want to spend my life with, I don’t want her to have to step into your shoes.”

Sharp pain sears through my heart, and I force air into my lungs, his words reverberating in my mind over and over again. The thought of someone else in our home, in his bed... it kills me. Is this how Lily felt when she found out we were getting married?

I get it now.

The agony is barely tolerable, and in my case, the woman in his future doesn’t even have a face. She isn’t someone I know and love.

“I understand,” I tell him, my voice breaking as I slip out of bed, uncaring about the cold air hitting my skin in a desperate attempt to get away before I burst into tears. I shouldn’t even want this with him, but I can’t help myself. With each passing day, it becomes harder to remember the past, the hatred. More and more often, I just want to lose myself in him, in the moments of happiness I feel with him. I haven’t felt *whole* since I walked away from him, and I want to. I want everything we used to have, everything we were.

Zane's arm wraps around my waist before I can take another step, and I gasp as he pulls me back onto the bed, my back crashing against his chest. He holds me tightly and presses his forehead to my shoulder, his breathing erratic. "Forget it. You should come," he whispers, his tone conveying his torment. "I'll bring you with me."

My heart skips a beat, hope rising as my eyes flutter closed. "No," I murmur, my voice thick. "You're right. It's... it's not my place."

He sighs and tightens his grip on me. "You're coming with me tonight," he says, his tone brooking no argument. I lean back against him, my eyes burning with unshed tears. This is what Lily told me she feared — that I'd end up forgiving him, and she'd have to watch me do it. I promised her I wouldn't, but with each passing day, that promise becomes harder to keep.

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Chapter Sixty

ZANE

I glance over at Celeste as I park in front of my grandmother's house. She's barely spoken a word since we left her parents' house, and I only have myself to blame for it. I never should've said what I did, especially not after the night we just shared.

"Are you okay?" I ask, my voice soft.

She looks up at me, her expression guarded. She hasn't looked at me that way in years — not since we were in high school. She looks wary and insecure, and truthfully, I'd much prefer her hatred. That hurts less than this does.

"I'm fine," she murmurs, her tone infused with her best attempts at reassurance. If I didn't know her so well, I might have fallen for it.

I sigh and turn toward her, my touch gentle as I brush her curls out of her face. She flinches, and I freeze, pulling my hand back. "I don't know what to do here, Celeste."

Her eyes meet mine, and I'm transfixed as countless emotions cross her face, each of them telling me something I struggle to believe. I've fallen for this before, and I paid for it. "There's nothing you can do," she says. "Let's go in. I promise I'll be on my best behavior. I'll do just enough to take away their worst worries, but not so much that I..." she tears her gaze away for a moment. I watch as she takes a steadying breath. "I won't do so much that

they'll like me more than whoever comes after me. I won't seek their forgiveness or try to mend what I broke, so don't worry, okay?"

She inhales shakily, and the smile she gives me is so sad it makes me want to drop to my knees and beg for her forgiveness. I've become so used to the blame and hatred we throw back and forth that I didn't think I held the power to hurt her. I didn't think she cared enough, and I don't know how I feel about finding out that I was mistaken.

She turns away and steps out of the car before I can say anything else, and I follow her. "Celeste!" I call. She pauses and looks back at me over her shoulder, a vision in the pale pink dress she's wearing tonight. I grab her arm and pull her into me, making her lose her footing. She crashes against my chest, and I wrap one arm around her waist, the other reaching up to cradle her face.

"When we go in there, remember you're my wife. Right now, in this moment, I'm yours. That's all that matters, okay?"

She leans into my hand, her eyes falling closed for a few beats. "But you won't always be. You can't be," she whispers, "and I'd do well to remember it."

"Celeste," I murmur, tightening my grip on her.

"Zane?" I tense and let go of my wife at the sound of Sierra's voice. She pauses mid-step when she spots Celeste, both women freezing instantly, neither quite sure where to look. I wrap my hand around Celeste's waist in a gesture of solidarity, and she steps closer to me.

"Oh," Sierra says eventually. "Why is she here? Did Grandma force you to bring her?"

Celeste flinches imperceptibly and looks down. I haven't seen her so defeated in years, and it makes every protective instinct I thought I'd buried come alive. "Sierra," I warn. "That's my *wife* you're talking about. She's a member of our family too."

Sierra searches my face, her gaze moving from me to Celeste, and back. "Don't say I didn't warn you," she says, before walking past us and into the house, the door slamming closed behind her.

I sigh and look up at the starry sky for a moment, feeling conflicted. What the fuck do I do? Why the fuck did Grandma think forcing Celeste and me together would be a good idea?

"I'll go," Celeste tells me, her voice soft. "You were right when you told me to stay away from your family, Zane. I'm not sure what I was thinking. I

saw you with my parents yesterday, and I just thought..." she shakes her head. "I'll go home. My presence would just ruin your family dinner, and you're right, you know? What's the point? In three years, I won't be here. Why should they suffer through having to see me in the meantime?"

I smile at her wryly and grab her hand. "Celeste, it's only a matter of time before Grandma would force you to join anyway. We can delay the inevitable, but we can't escape it. You're here now, so why don't we just forge ahead, together?"

She looks into my eyes and hesitates for a moment before nodding, seemingly unsure. I smile at her as I pull her along, my arm wrapping around her shoulder as we walk in. I'd be lying if I said I'm not nervous. My family attended our wedding, but other than my grandmother, no one congratulated us, nor did they come anywhere near Celeste when they didn't need to.

A hush falls over the room when we walk in, and I silently catalog everyone's reaction. Raven looks conflicted, while Val and Faye look like they're not sure what to do. Ares and Luca look dismayed, and Lex looks downright furious. Dion is the only one who looks at her with a hint of compassion. Sierra doesn't even bother looking up from her wineglass, her jaw clenched.

"Come sit, Celeste," Grandma says, beckoning us in. "I'm so glad you could make it tonight."

I throw her a grateful look as I walk Celeste over to her seat. It's strange to have her here, right where I wanted her for years. My wife taps her foot nervously as our staff begin to serve dinner, and I place my hand on top of her knee, drawing soothing circling across her skin. She stills and reaches for her wine glass, her gaze filled with longing as Raven and Sierra whisper to themselves about the book they haven't had time to read yet — the one I know Celeste is reading right now. Faye joins the conversation, telling them she's loving it so far, and Val grins as she tells them the audiobook is even better. "You should read it, Celeste. It's so good!" Faye says in an attempt to include my wife.

Raven and Sierra both freeze, and Celeste merely nods instead of joining the conversation, like I thought she'd want to. Her hand shakes as she empties her glass of wine, and I squeeze her leg reassuringly, unsure what to do. For so long, I wanted Celeste to see the damage she did, to feel

its aftereffects, but witnessing it might just destroy me even more than it does her.

She stares at her plate the entire time, not uttering a single word unless Grandma asks her a direct question, and fuck, it hurts to see her that way — but what hurts more is knowing she earned the treatment she's getting, and there's nothing I can do to fix her mistakes.

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Chapter Sixty-One

CELESTE

My fingertips trail over the edges of the worn photo frame, Lily's beaming face staring back at me. We made this frame together when we were fourteen, almost entirely from seashells we'd gathered. Normally, this photo soothes me, reminding me of the good times.

Today, it just inspires guilt. I grip the shells along the frame tightly, my heart heavy. I've never been filled with this many doubts or this much regret. I'm tired of hurting, of hurting the people around me in return.

For days now, my mind has been tormenting me with memories of Sierra and Raven, and the friendship we shared. They were the only ones who truly supported Zane and me from the moment they found out, but that wasn't why I loved them. It was the endless laughter, the inside jokes, the heartfelt conversations, and the way they made me feel so included when I didn't think I'd ever belong with them.

I sigh and squeeze my eyes closed for a moment, feeling intensely guilty. I know what I'm going through isn't even a fraction of the pain Lily felt, and I feel more conflicted than ever before. With each day that passes, it's becoming harder to hang on to the hatred and grief that fueled me. Each time Zane and I share a moment, I'm left with more questions. I can't reconcile the man I've always known with the man Lily told me he was, but I can't handle the implications of my doubts either. I'm more lost and confused than ever as I stare at the photo in my hands, my heart aching.

“I reassessed the final merger documents,” Zane calls from his end of the office, and I place the frame down carefully. “I’d like to sell one of the hotels in the south of Spain. It’s tiny and derelict, and I honestly can’t remember why we decided to keep it.”

I tense, instantly realizing which hotel he means. I glance up at him, disappointment settling deep in my chest. When we began our negotiations, we agreed to carefully assess what we should or shouldn’t keep from both of our companies, so we could focus our efforts on improving performance at our best hotels. Zane asked me for a list of properties I absolutely didn’t want to sell, and the one he’s referring to, Alto, was at the very top. It’s the first property my grandfather ever fully entrusted me with, and it’s the one I learned the ropes with. It’s true that it’s old, and when the company sustained financial damage, we weren’t able to maintain it the way we could have. I’d been looking forward to restoring it, but I’m tired of fighting with Zane over every little thing. The hatred I saw in his eyes used to thrill me, because it meant I’d gotten to him — now it just hurts.

“Why?” I ask, rising from my seat. He grabs his tablet from his desk and saunters over, his gaze challenging. “It’s too old and it requires too much yearly maintenance for starters,” he says as he walks around my desk, his body brushing against mine as he leans in to show me his tablet. He’s in another one of those three-piece suits of his today, and my gaze roams over him appreciatively, only to settle on his chest. I’ve been so tempted to ask him about his tattoo, but it’d undoubtedly turn into another massive argument. More than once, he’s made it clear he doesn’t want me interfering in his private life, but I kept ignoring his warnings, and that only made him hate me more. “It’s also not luxurious enough, and not in a desirable enough area so the occupancy is too low. We should get rid of it.”

I stare at the photos of the hotel, my heart aching at the thought of everything it could be if we invested in it. It would make for the perfect luxury retreat due to its location. “Okay,” I murmur, my voice soft.

Zane raises a brow. “What?”

I look into his eyes, my heart beating a rhythm that’s uniquely his. Being around him again is so confusing. There’s so much distance between us, except for those few moments when we give in to that chemistry we’ve always had. I’m his wife, but it doesn’t feel that way. Outside of work, I rarely even see him, and we don’t talk about anything but the merger. I have no idea who he is these days, and he has no interest in showing me. I should

be grateful for it, but the more time passes, the more it just leaves me feeling disappointed and empty.

“Sell it if you think that’s the right decision,” I tell him, my voice soft, defeated. “There’s no point in hanging on to things that are costing us, purely because of the memories attached to them.”

Zane searches my face and places his tablet on my desk. “I thought you’d fight me on this. That hotel was at the top of your list of assets you wanted to keep.”

My heart squeezes tightly, hurt searing through it. “You knew it meant something to me, but you still want to sell it.” I look away and inhale shakily. It makes sense, of course. Why should he care about my preferences when it’s his business that’ll suffer for it? The way he sees it, I’ve already cost him enough. “Just get rid of it, Zane.”

“Whether I like it or not, you have an equal stake in this business. I *can’t* sell it unless you sign off on it too.”

I glance at him, noting his uneasiness. “I’ll sign,” I reassure him, before tearing my eyes away.

Zane steps closer to me and grabs my chin, forcing me to face him. “What’s wrong with you? You’ve been like this for days now. Am I really supposed to believe you suddenly don’t care about the property you fought to keep? What’s going on?”

I meet his gaze and hold it, tired of hiding. “Does it matter?”

Zane studies me carefully and sighs before letting go of my chin to cup my face instead. “What if I tell you it does, Celeste? Would you believe me if I tell you I’m beginning to worry about my wife? That I’m messing with you because I thought you’d care enough about this little hotel to snap out of the mood you’ve been in?” I lean into his touch, longing overwhelming me. “I don’t know how to handle this listless version of you, Celeste. I want the woman who fights with me every second of every day, the one who won’t let go once she’s set her mind to something.”

I take a steadying breath when his thumb brushes over my bottom lip, a deep need settling in my chest. “I thought you hated that woman.”

He lets his hand fall away, and I miss his touch instantly. “I thought I did too.”

Chapter Sixty-Two

CELESTE

I smile nervously as Grandma Anne's housekeeper leads me into her kitchen. If anyone were to see her right now, with a frilly white apron tied around her and a baking tray with fresh cookies in front of her, they'd think she's an innocent little grandma.

"Celeste," she says. "Thank you for dropping by." She gestures at the breakfast bar in the kitchen, and I sit down, not quite sure what I'm doing here. She called me this morning and told me to drop by after work, but I had no idea what I'd be walking in on. I hadn't expected *this*.

"I called you over to give you something," she says, gesturing toward a jewelry box with the logo of a famous jeweler on it — Laurier. It isn't a brand that's accessible to most people, and even the Windsors only use them for heirloom pieces. "Each of my granddaughters-in-law receives one of these, and one day, if you have a daughter or daughter-in-law of your own, you'll pass it on. Open it."

My hands tremble as I carefully unlock the box, revealing a stunning diamond and ruby choker. My first instinct is to snap the box closed and push it back toward her, but I resist, knowing she wouldn't allow it, so I just stare at the jewelry that'll never be mine. Zane wouldn't want me to wear this. I have no doubt he'd want to give this to the woman he'll eventually take as his wife once he can legally end things between us. Just like the rose garden, this isn't meant for me. "It's beautiful," I murmur, my heart aching.

I can just imagine the pride on Zane's face when he sees it on a woman he loves, one that doesn't make him look as conflicted as I do. When Zane looks into my eyes, there's always a hint of dismay, like he hates that he has any feelings for me at all. There's too much baggage, too much pain.

"This is for you, too," she says as she hands me a box of her freshly made cookies. I stare at it in surprise, countless memories replaying through my mind. I don't like cookies, but I grew to like these purely because they meant so much to Sierra. I pull the box to my chest and hold on to it tightly, remorse washing over me. More than anything, I wish we were still friends, and I hadn't lost her too.

"You don't see it," Grandma Anne says, "but Zane is much happier now than he has been in years. That's all his siblings want for him, you know? They just want him to be happy. If you can make that happen, they'll forgive you for anything."

I look at her, unsure whether I should believe her. Even if it's true, I remember how happy Zane and I used to be, and we're far from it now. I don't think we can ever regain that kind of happiness, not with everything that's standing in the way. I'll never forgive him for what he's done, and he won't ever forgive me for the way I retaliated either.

"One more thing," Grandma Anne says as she takes off her apron, revealing her black pantsuit. "No more missing family dinner. I've made more exceptions for you than you could possibly realize, but I won't make any more. You'll be there every week from now on."

I part my lips to object, but she throws me a look that tells me it'll be futile. Ever since the first family dinner I attended, I've avoided her house entirely, unwilling to hurt anyone more than I already have.

Grandma Anne glances at her watch and steps back, not even giving me a chance to make my case as she leads me out of the house. "I'll see you on Sunday," she says as her driver pulls up in front of us.

I nod and watch her drive away, my mood somber as I walk to my own car. My gaze keeps dropping to the box of cookies, and I end up placing them in my passenger seat, guilt eating at me as I get behind the wheel.

Before I even realize what I'm doing, I'm driving up the windy road that leads to Sierra's house, my heart pounding wildly. I park in front of her door and just stare at the box for a few minutes, undecided. When we were younger, I'd once promised her I'd give her the first box of cookies I ever

received from Grandma Anne, but it seems silly to be here now. She likely wouldn't even take them, purely because I've touched the box.

I get out of the car with the cookies in hand, my nerves sky-high as I walk up to her porch. I stare at her red front door, unsure what to do, only to take the coward's way out. I bend down and place the cookies right in front of her door before stepping back, my heart heavy.

I draw a shaky breath and turn around, only for the door to open before I've taken three steps. I glance back and find Sierra standing in her doorway, a long, silk black robe wrapped around her. Her gaze moves from me to the box of cookies, and she sighs as she crosses her arms.

"What is this?"

I turn to face her, unease running down my spine. "Your grandmother just gave me a box of freshly baked cookies," I say carefully. "I haven't touched them. They should still be warm." She raises a brow, and I bite down on my lip, but that doesn't stifle the words I tried to swallow down. "You once told me I could have your cookies right until I started receiving my own, and at that point, you'd start fighting me for them. You might not remember it, but I do. We were in Zane's kitchen, and I'd felt so alone in that moment because we weren't getting anywhere with either of our grandparents, but there you were, taking away my discouragement with a sweet smile." The words tumble out in a way that betrays my nerves. I take a steadying breath and look up at her earnestly. "I'm here to tell you that you won't ever have to fight me for them. For the next two and a half years, I'll give you all of them."

Sierra bends down to pick up the box, her gaze conflicted. "Two and a half years," she repeats.

I tense and nod at her. "Don't worry," I murmur. "I won't intrude in your life any longer than necessary. I'll just... I'll drop these off for you like I did today. You won't even have to see me."

"You'll leave Zane when the contractual term is up?"

I hesitate, and then I nod.

"So you'll abandon all of us again, like you did back then?"

I take a hesitant step forward and shake my head. "No," I tell her. "Zane... he wants a clean break once our time is up. He doesn't... he doesn't want me as his wife, Sierra, and with everything that's standing between us, I'm not sure it could work even if he did. I'm not abandoning anyone. I'm just setting him free."

It hurts to say it, but it hurts even more to know it's true.

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Chapter Sixty-Three

ZANE

I pause in my bedroom's doorway, the soft sound of muted sobs making me freeze in place. I take a hesitant step forward, unable to ignore Celeste's distress. She's so lost in her grief that she doesn't even hear me approach.

I slip into bed, and she tenses before burying her face in her pillow, trying her best to hide the evidence of her tears yet unable to keep her shoulders from shaking. My wife chokes back a sob, and her inability to keep from crying only results in further sounds of helpless agony.

My arms wrap around her, and I pull her against me wordlessly, her back flush against my bare chest. Celeste turns around and wraps her arms around my neck, seeking solace, and I hold on to her with all I've got.

"What happened, Celestial?" I whisper as I wrap my hand into her hair, my heart heavy. I've never seen her cry like this. In the days after Lily, she hid away from me, not wanting me anywhere near her. Perhaps that should've been a sign, but when it comes to her, I've always ignored every red flag. I still do.

Celeste clings to me desperately, her leg wrapping over my hip, and I tighten my grip on her. "I'm so s-sorry," she stammers through her tears, and I gently caress her hair, wrapping her curls around my finger over and over again.

"What are you sorry for, my love?" What could've possibly happened to distress her this much?

Celeste's breathing is choppy as she tries her best to chase away her sobs, and I just lie there with her, wishing I could take away her pain. I'd take it all from her if I could. "S-Sierra," she tells me.

I tense at the sound of my sister's name, protectiveness washing over me. I may not want Sierra to hurt Celeste, but similarly, I don't want her hurting my sister any further either. "What happened?"

Celeste's body trembles as she tells me about my grandmother's cookies and the promises she tried to keep. All the while, I rub her back soothingly, a strange kind of jealousy settling deep in my chest. Out of everyone, Sierra is the only one she tried to make amends with. Not me. *Sierra*.

"I never meant to hurt her," she whispers. The worst of her sobs have subsided, but her pain is still clear in her voice. "I didn't want to push her away, but I couldn't... she just... she reminded me of you, and every time I spoke to her, she did all she could to get us back together. No matter what I said, she wouldn't listen, and I... I just pushed her away, and I've always regretted it."

She buries her face against my neck, her breathing ragged, and I hug her tightly, my heart aching for both of them. Sierra doesn't make friends easily, and I know how much Celeste meant to her. Neither Raven nor she would stop trying to get us back together until I sat them down and told them what Celeste had done to me, and to Windsor Hotels.

"You broke her heart when you broke mine," I murmur. "She's still hurt, not because we broke up, but because you left her without an explanation. After our parents..." I sigh and hold Celeste a little tighter. "Sierra doesn't do well with being abandoned, and you were one of the few people she's ever truly let in. Raven is very similar."

My wife begins to cry all over again, and I rub her back soothingly, unsure what to do or say to make it better. "I miss her," she admits, her voice breaking. "*So much*."

I swallow hard, my own heart breaking. For years, I did all I could to convince myself she was some kind of scheming bitch, that everything was black and white, my hatred becoming all-encompassing. In reality, it's never that simple. Not all the pain she caused was intentional, and not all her decisions came without regrets and self-inflicted heartache.

"She misses you too. Do you know how I know that?"

Celeste shakes her head, and I pull away a little to look at her. "For one, she took the cookies." That makes my wife smile, and I grin back at her,

relieved to find her grief lifted a little. “But what really gave it away was the hairpin you had in your hair on our wedding day, the one you keep with your jewelry. It’s one of Sierra’s most precious belongings, because it used to belong to our mother. I’m not sure how it ended up in your hair that day, but I can only assume she wanted it to be your *something borrowed*.”

I brush her tears away with my thumbs, but it’s to no avail, because she won’t stop crying. “Sierra is ruthless and swift in her decision-making,” I continue, “but she isn’t a mean person. The fact she’s lashing out at you means she still cares. I’ve seen her cut people out of her life without a second thought. When she decides she doesn’t care anymore, she genuinely doesn’t. It’s a quality I often wished I had too, but it’s one I could never replicate.”

She looks into my eyes, her gaze searching, like she isn’t sure she believes me. “Raven lent it to me,” she whispers. “The hairpin.”

I raise a brow in surprise. Sierra must’ve asked Raven to lend it to Celeste on her behalf. Raven was as hurt as Sierra was, but I should’ve known she’d be less stubborn. She has a heart of gold, and it’s often wasted on people. I hope that isn’t the case with Celeste.

“She told me she’d let me borrow it when she brought the wedding dress she’d designed for me. It was the one I always thought I’d marry you in, the one she and I would dream about. I didn’t think she’d ever create it, but she did.”

My heart skips a beat, and I stare at my wife in surprise. “Your wedding dress was always meant for us?” She nods, her gaze conflicted, a hint of shyness in her eyes. “So it was just the lingerie you intended for Emerson?” My voice is hard, my bitterness evident.

“No,” she whispers. “The bottoms of my shoes were my *something blue*. The lingerie... that was my *something old*. I bought it six years ago, when we...” She draws a shaky breath and hides her face against my neck. “I would never have worn it for him. I’m sorry, Zane. I just...”

She just wanted to hurt me. I sigh as I pull her closer, not having it in me to be mad at her, not tonight. “I’m glad,” I whisper, the truth coming easier in the darkness, with her body pressed against mine. I’m not sure her relationship with Sierra and Raven is salvageable, but the way she obviously still cares about them after all these years gives me hope I wish I didn’t feel.

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Chapter Sixty-Four

ZANE

Concern washes over me as I stare at Celeste from my desk, taking in her red eyes and the way she keeps staring at the photo of Lily and her, that she keeps on her desk. She's been listless for a few days now, all the fight in her gone.

It's odd to watch my wife be so heartbroken over her friendship with my sister, when she's never once looked at *me* that way. Part of me wants to console her, but another part of me is glad she's finally realizing just how much damage she's done. Does she realize I'm the one who had to pick up the pieces when she left?

I sigh as I tear my gaze away and check my email instead, needing something else to focus on. Having Celeste back in our lives is doing more harm than good, and I don't understand what Grandma was thinking. In my quest to get our engagement broken, I sat her down and told her everything — everything about Lily, about the way Celeste planted fake evidence, and the way we fell apart. It didn't have the effect I thought it'd have. If anything, it only seemed to solidify her decision to push us together, and I don't quite understand why she thinks that would solve anything at all.

I click on an incoming email absentmindedly and raise a brow when I realize that our new restaurant is ready for inspection. My gaze drifts back to my wife, and I hesitate for a beat. "Would you like to have dinner with me?" I ask, my voice tinged with uncertainty.

Her gaze snaps up, and for a few moments, something flickers in her eyes. “Amélie, our new French restaurant in The Lacara is done. Normally, I test out everything before giving the okay to open it to the public.”

“Oh,” she murmurs, her shoulders sagging. “Sure, I’ll join you.” Celeste sounds apathetic, and it frustrates me endlessly. I thought I’d grown weary of constantly arguing with her, but I’d rather have that than this.

“Let’s head out now,” I tell her, glancing at my watch. “It’s nearly time for dinner anyway.”

She nods demurely and reaches for her handbag. Somehow, I’d expected more of a fight, or perhaps an outright rejection. Instead, she simply rises from her seat, looking fucking ethereal in that blue dress.

My eyes roam over her as we step into my private elevator, my gaze settling on her gold nail polish. It’s one she’s wearing often these days — she wore it on our wedding day too. “What is it called?” I ask as I reach for her hand, holding it in mine tenderly. I’m not even sure why I can’t resist touching her today. Perhaps it’s because the distance between us seems greater than ever, or perhaps it’s because I’m hoping to take away some of her lethargy. I shouldn’t want to, but I can’t bear to see her in so much pain.

Celeste looks up at me, mixed emotions flickering through her eyes. Heartbreak. Hope. Longing. “*Shattered Souls*,” she whispers, just as the elevator reaches the bottom floor.

My heart wrenches, and I entwine our fingers as I lead her to my car. Celeste doesn’t say a word on the way to the restaurant, and worry begins to gnaw at me. From the moment she walked back into my life, she’s taken great pleasure in annoying me in any way she can. I’m not sure what to do with this quiet version of her.

“We’re here,” I tell her as I park up, and she glances at me dazedly before getting out of the car. She hasn’t been herself since I found her crying over Sierra, and more and more, she seems to be lost in thought — lost in the past.

“Mr. and Mrs. Windsor,” the chef says as we enter, a wide smile on his face. *Mrs. Windsor*. I’ll never tire of hearing it. I place my hand on Celeste’s lower back as he guides us to our table and explains what we’re having tonight, and I watch her intently as her professional mask clicks back into place.

“Comfortable chairs,” Celeste murmurs, her eyes roaming over the venue dispassionately. “The decor is just as I imagined it.”

I nod and follow her gaze, a hint of pride settling in my chest. We've always come up with better concepts together than we could individually, but seeing them come to fruition is bittersweet. If things hadn't gone wrong, could we have had this all along?

I raise my wine glass, and she hesitates a beat before doing the same. "To a successful collaboration, and many more to come," I say, the words feeling empty. We used to toast to happiness, big dreams, and the love between us.

Celeste's eyes meet mine, and for a moment, I'm certain I see the same longing I'm feeling in her gaze. Does she miss us the way I do?

"Do you regret it?" I ask without thinking.

Her eyes flash with such a deep sense of loss that it steals my breath away. She studies me as she ponders my question, and I smile wryly.

"This is what I always wanted with you, you know? Dinner in a nice restaurant, and being able to call you mine in public. Here we are, you and me, and we both look like we'd rather be anywhere but here."

"Do *you*?" she asks, her voice sharp. "Do you regret doing what you did, Zane? Somehow I doubt it, or you wouldn't have attacked Harrison Developments the way you did."

I take her in, noting her beautiful curly hair and those amber eyes that betray her torment. She looks so lost, so hurt... and I can't look away. "I do," I admit. "I regret ever falling for you and thinking my love for you would be enough, that we could get through anything together. I regret believing in us the way I did and risking it all for you."

I run a hand through my hair and draw a shaky breath. "You know what I regret the most? I regret asking you to dance with me at that gala. I should've let you go, should've moved on from my childish crush on you, and heeded my grandmother's warnings. Hell, if I could go back in time, I would've left you alone on prom night and wouldn't have consoled you. I wish I never kissed you, never brought you to a place I'd only ever wanted to share with my wife. All of my regrets have one thing in common, Celeste. *You*."

She looks away and wraps her arms around herself, her posture vulnerable. "The feeling is entirely mutual, Zane." Her voice is soft, defeated, and for once, there's no malice in her tone. The way she looks at me cuts through all my defenses, and fuck, it makes me want to take back every single word I just uttered.

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Chapter Sixty-Five

ZANE

I glance at Sierra, who's seated on the counter next to her stove, and snatch the cheese she's eating out of her hands. "Not only did you demand I come over to cook your favorite cheesy macaroni with no less than six different cheeses, but you're also eating all the ingredients."

She crosses her arms and glares at me. "If you cooked quicker, I wouldn't be hungry enough to steal your stupid, precious ingredients. How hard could it be? Why is it taking so long?"

I stare at her with a deadpan expression. "Sierra, it's been ten minutes."

She huffs, and I bite back a smile. My sweet little sister is more irritable than usual today, and I suspect it has everything to do with Celeste. I knew something was up when she requested comfort food, but the way she keeps glancing at me with questions in her eyes confirms it.

"Just ask," I murmur as I melt together the different varieties of cheese she asked for, creating a sauce I perfected for her.

"Ask what?"

I smile at the pan and shake my head. "Whatever it is that makes you look at me like that. If you're worried about her, you're welcome to ask me how she's doing, but I won't volunteer any information about her."

It's interesting to see how much my sister still cares. That's the thing with Sierra — once she lets someone into her heart, it's forever. I suppose we have that in common. "Well...h-how is she?"

I'd been prepared to reassure her, but one look into her worried eyes, and the words lodge in my throat. "She misses you."

Sierra looks away, but not before I glimpse a hint of torment. "Oh."

I bite down on my lip, uncertain. "She cried herself to sleep two weeks ago, and I honestly don't think I've ever witnessed such heartbreak before. It wasn't me she was crying over, Sierra."

She wraps her arms around herself and takes a deep, steadying breath. "Two weeks ago... that's when she brought me cookies."

I nod slowly. "She mentioned something about that," I mutter, a hint of jealousy taking root deep inside my chest. Out of all the vows she decided to break, this is the one she won't. It hurts to know her loyalty to my sister outweighs the loyalty she should've shown *me*.

Sierra stares at me, her gaze conflicted. "Did you really tell Celeste you don't want her as your wife?" I freeze, my eyes snapping to hers. "She said you'd asked for a clean break when your time is up and reassured me she wouldn't intrude in our lives."

"I thought you two talked about cookies?"

Sierra wraps her arms around herself, her expression pained. "*Did you?*"

I nod hesitantly.

"Did you mean it?"

I stare at the pan in front of me, unable to face my sister. "I meant the words when I said them."

She brushes her hair behind her ears and stares ahead, looking as lost as I feel. "Do you still?"

My mind drifts back to the pain in Celeste's eyes when I told her I didn't want my future wife having to step into her shoes. I'm not even sure why I said it — I don't see myself ever getting married after her. It wasn't my intention to wound her, not consciously, at least. I'm not sure what happened. The night we shared made me feel more vulnerable than I'd anticipated, and I'd known it couldn't last.

"You're falling for her again, aren't you?"

I snap out of my daze and look up at Sierra. "No." How could I fall in love with someone I never fell out of love with? That was what I've always hated most, that I love her despite everything she did to me.

"She framed you for corporate espionage and had you arrested," Sierra reminds me, her voice breaking. "She took every project you'd worked on

together and weaponized it.”

“I know,” I murmur, exhausted. “What she did isn’t something I’ll ever forgive, Sierra. I’m just saying I get where she was coming from. I won’t forgive her for the way she smiled at me and kissed me while planting fake evidence, the way she fell asleep next to me and dreamed of my downfall. I never saw it coming.”

I empty Sierra’s box of macaroni in the pan, my anger burning hot. “Do you have any idea how happy I was that she’d finally snapped out of her daze? For weeks, she’d either been drowning in her grief or accusing me of something I didn’t do, so when she finally seemed like herself again, I’d felt so relieved. I thought she’d started to see reason, that she was starting to *listen*... but it was all an act. I’d been preparing to walk away from everything, had accepted I’d be disowned for loving her.” I smile humorlessly, my heart heavy. “I’d already bought her a ring, you know? Designed it myself and had Laurier craft it for her.”

“Zane,” Sierra whispers, and I look at her, pure heartache holding me in its grip.

“Do you have any idea what it’s like to look into the eyes of the woman you love more than anything, and realize she never loved you the same? No matter what happened, I could never do to her what she did to me. I’d have walked away and ended things. I never would’ve hurt her like that — and that’s why it can’t ever work between us. She doesn’t have any faith in me, *in us*, and I don’t trust her. Even if she fell back in love with me, I’d never be able to trust that her feelings are real, that she wouldn’t destroy us the next time someone accuses me of something. Each time she smiles at me, I wonder if it’s even real, or if it’s another act. I can’t live like that, not even for her.”

Chapter Sixty-Six

ZANE

I stand in the doorway as Celeste picks up what has to be the tenth outfit, her expression betraying her nerves. Grandma told me she warned Celeste about missing any more family dinners, but I'd thought she'd have ignored the warning.

She undoes the zipper of her black dress and pushes it off, frustration dripping off her. My breath hitches when it pools on the floor, revealing the stunning black lace lingerie she's wearing, complete with the sexiest little things around her thighs. What are they even called? Garters, right? I have no idea, but she looks fucking irresistible.

Her gaze snaps to mine when I walk in, and she moves her arm over her stomach in an attempt to hide part of her body. My wife's face flushes when I place my hand on her shoulder and position myself behind her. "It's just family dinner," I murmur, my tone reassuring. "You don't have to overthink it." I'm not sure why I can't resist taking away her worries. Every damn day I remind myself of everything she's done to me, but one of those helpless looks of hers, and I'm brought to my knees.

"I know, but I... I just..." She exhales shakily and looks down. "I wanted to make a good impression. I don't... I know it's silly, but I don't want them to hate me even more."

Fuck. She can be so fucking sweet when she wants to be. I bury my free hand in her hair and tilt her head, exposing her neck. Celeste gasps when I

kiss her just below her ear, her gaze snapping up to meet mine in the mirror.

I can't make sense of her, and the lines between us continue to blur. The hatred is becoming harder to hold on to, especially when she looks at me like she needs saving. My free hand slides down her stomach, and she leans back against me, her head dropping to my shoulder. She's such a good girl sometimes, and when she acts like this, like she needs me, I'm tempted to believe her.

Celeste whimpers when I cup her breast with one hand, the other slowly sliding down and into the tiny scrap of fabric between her legs, until I've got the tips of my fingers resting against her pussy. Her breathing accelerates, and she watches me, desire rapidly overtaking her apathy. "Who did you want to impress?" I whisper, my teeth grazing over her ear as my fingers stroke her nipple over her bra.

Her hand wraps over my wrist, and she looks at me with such longing as she pushes my hand down further, her gaze pleading. I smirk at her, and she moans when I coat my fingers in her wetness before dragging it back up, leaving it resting against her clit.

"Who?"

She draws a shaky breath and parts her lips. "Raven. All of these dresses are her designs, one from each collection. I own every single piece she's ever designed, outside of her bridal range."

My heart wrenches, and I drop my mouth to her shoulder, digging my teeth into her soft skin just as I begin to circle her clit. I can't tell if I'm jealous of my sister-in-law, or relieved to learn Celeste truly never stopped loving her, just like she clearly still loves Sierra. She makes it so hard to hate her, and fuck, I want to. I wish she never showed me her vulnerability, her regret.

I push my fingers into her and curl them, drawing a sexy moan from her throat. "Zane," she whispers. She sounds so fucking needy, the distance that's usually between us entirely non-existent.

"Tell me what you want."

"You," she whispers. "I want you."

I groan and tear my hand off her bra to undo my fly, and she whimpers when my cock pushes against her ass. The way she immediately grinds up against me is intoxicating, and I hate how I can't resist her, how I can't look at her without wanting her. We can't keep doing this, I can't let her weaken my resolve.

Just as I've decided I need to step away, that I can't let her reel me in any further, she looks into my eyes through the mirror and smiles. "Fuck me," she whispers. "Please, Zane."

I grab her throat with one hand and push her underwear aside with the other, my grip on her neck tightening as I push my cock into her. Her eyes fall closed as she takes it all, and the way she moans is fucking enchanting.

"You love the way I still can't resist you, don't you?" I ask, my cock buried deep inside her and my fingers back on her clit, massaging, teasing. "Is it fun to see how quickly I fold when you beg for me like that?"

She looks at me defiantly, knowing full well I'm at her mercy even though I'm the one who has my hand around her throat. She tips her head back and rotates her hips a little, the movement betraying her desire. "It is fun," she admits, her eyes fluttering closed.

"Look in the mirror," I order, anger bleeding into my voice. "Look at the way you're taking your husband's cock, Celeste." My touch on her clit becomes punishing, and she moans as I fuck her with deep, harsh strokes. "This pussy still belongs to me. *You* still belong to me, Celeste."

Some days I wish it wasn't true, but then she smiles at me, and I thank every lucky star that it isn't Clifton she's smiling at. I tighten my grip on her neck and flick against her clit harder, overstimulating her. She whimpers, her body desperate for release, and I smirk as I lean in and capture her earlobe, biting down softly. "Say it," I whisper. "Tell me who you belong to."

Her eyes flash with the same simmering anger laced with lust, and she reaches up, her hand wrapping around the back of my neck. She turns her head toward mine, and the look she throws me makes me fucking breathless. "I'm yours, Zane Windsor," she says, before kissing me the way she used to, in that all-encompassing, maddening way. I never knew hatred and love could co-exist the way they do for her. She's *everything*, she always has been.

Celeste moans into my mouth as I finally give her what she's so desperate for, and she comes all around my cock as I swallow down every single one of her moans. The way her pussy constricts around me sends me over the edge, and she tightens her grip on me as I fill her up, pure possessiveness washing over me at the thought of her pussy dripping throughout dinner.

My breathing is ragged as I drop my forehead to her shoulder and breathe her in, both of us trying our hardest to catch our breath. “Wear the pink dress,” I whisper as I slip out of her. “It matches your nails.”

Her eyes meet mine in the mirror, her vulnerability disarming me entirely. She nods and quietly gets dressed, putting on the dress I chose as I straighten out my own clothes. I can’t help but smile at her when she throws me a shy look, her cheeks rosy. This version of her, that’s the one I never got over, the one I still love, the one I miss.

I grab her hand and entwine our fingers as I lead her out of the house, both of us oddly at peace for once. “What is it called?” I ask as we get into my car.

She glances over at me, her eyes wide. I grin at her expression, my curiosity piqued further. “Um... it’s, uh, well... it’s called *Got Myself Into a Jam-Balaya*.”

I burst out laughing, and she throws me the cutest, flustered look. Fuck, I wish she was always like this — so sweet. “You did, didn’t you?” I murmur.

She sighs and nods, her mood sobering. “I never answered your question at dinner,” she murmurs as I drive over to my grandmother’s house, her gaze falling to her nails. “I do regret it, Zane. I regret causing so much collateral damage. If there’s one thing I could change, I would undo what I’ve done to you, even if it’s just to spare the people we both love all the pain we caused.”

I sigh as I park the car, my gaze roaming over her face. Five years of mutual destruction, only for us to find ourselves sitting here together, married and deeply unhappy. She tears her eyes off mine and gets out of the car, the moment breaking.

I follow her, and she glances over her shoulder, making my heart skip a beat. I offer her my hand, and she glances at it for a moment, seemingly unsure of what I’m offering. Truthfully, I’m not quite sure myself.

Relief rushes through me when her hand wraps around mine, and I entwine our fingers. The room falls silent when we walk in, and I throw Celeste an encouraging look. Only Grandma, Faye, and Val speak to her throughout dinner, and the entire time, she clings to the hand I’ve got wrapped over her knee, her fingers between mine.

I know how to deal with her hatred, but this version of her? Fuck, this version of my wife will have me on my knees, begging for more.

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Chapter Sixty-Seven

ZANE

I wake to the sound of quiet sobbing and broken pleas, only to find Celeste still fast asleep, tears running down her face. She chokes on a sob, and I pull her against me, holding her close. “Celeste,” I murmur, trying my hardest to wake her gently.

She pushes against me and turns her head in distress, lost in a nightmare. “*Please*,” she whispers, and her tone cuts straight through my heart.

I grab her shoulders and gently shake her until she startles awake, her eyes instantly finding mine. Another sob tears through her throat, and I pull her against me, hugging her tightly. “It’s okay,” I whisper, my hand roaming over her back soothingly. “It’s just a nightmare, Celestial.”

She buries her face against my bare chest, her body shaking from the lingering effects of her dreams. “Oh God, Zane,” she says, her voice breaking as she wraps her arms around my neck and clings to me, her breathing ragged.

“It’s okay,” I repeat, over and over again, wishing I could just take away her distress entirely. What could’ve possibly upset her this much? She hasn’t been herself in a couple of weeks now, and I’m not sure what to do. I didn’t think I’d ever miss the woman who looked at me with nothing but hatred in her eyes, but I do.

She falls apart in my embrace, and I just hold her, murmuring soft soothing words, promising that nothing can touch her when she's in my arms, until her breathing evens out, and her tears dry. "What happened?" I loosen my grip a little, and she clutches at me, unwilling to let go. She looks so tormented, so hurt. "What's wrong, Celeste? Baby, I'm so worried about you. Please talk to me."

Her eyes roam over my face, and fresh tears spill down her face. "Zane," she whispers, her voice breaking. I cup her cheek and dry her face, my thumb catching each new tear. She looks into my eyes and draws a shaky breath. "I dreamed about Lily."

I freeze at the sound of her name, cold dread cascading over me. Helplessness rushes through me, followed shortly by anger. I pull my hand away, but Celeste catches it and entwines our fingers before pulling our joined hands to her chest.

"Yesterday, her father called to invite me to her memorial in a couple of weeks, and I think that's maybe why I dreamed of her again. I... I dreamed of her standing on the bridge," she says, sniffing. "I told her I missed her, and she... she told me I couldn't, because if I really missed her... I wouldn't be with you." She draws a shaky breath and lets her eyes fall closed for a moment, her heartbreak evident. "She stood on that bridge and asked me if it helps me sleep at night if I pretend to hate you while falling into bed with you. She accused me of forgetting her and wanting to move on with you, and I... I couldn't refute her words."

She tightens her grip on my hand as she bursts into tears all over again. "Zane, I don't know what to believe anymore."

My eyes widen, and I study her for a moment. Never once has she given me any indication that she might believe me, that Lily might not have told her the full truth. "What do you mean?"

Her eyes drop to my tattoo, and she draws a shaky breath as she places her free hand over my chest. "Without fresh grief blinding me, I'm struggling to believe that you... that you'd risk what we had. There's so much that just doesn't make sense, and she isn't here to tell me the truth, but *you are*. We've gone over this so many times, and it doesn't make sense that you still wouldn't admit it. I don't know if my mind is just deceiving me, if I just desperately want to believe that you couldn't... that you wouldn't have done that to me. Every time you touch me, I'm convinced that... that nothing could come close... not for me, but also not for you."

She squeezes her eyes closed and tries her hardest to draw a breath, her body shaking. “I feel like I’m going crazy, and I hate feeling this way. Am I deluding myself?”

“No,” I whisper, desperation bleeding into my voice. “I *wouldn’t* risk what we had, Celeste. I *didn’t*. I let you comb through my phone and gave you access to the entire Windsor security system so you could search the camera footage yourself. If I had something to hide, I’d never have done that. You told me I only did it because I’d deleted anything you might be able to find beforehand, but that simply isn’t true. I jumped through every hoop to prove my innocence, and *begged* you to believe me. Celeste, I was ready to walk away from my family for you. Why would I ever cheat on you when you were my whole world?”

She stares at me with pure heartbreak in her eyes, and I sigh, lamenting our loss. “Every time I begin to believe that, I dream of Lily, and I just... I don’t know how to live with the guilt that comes with knowing I was part of the reason my best friend chose to die, and I can’t make sense of it. She wouldn’t have done what she did if it wasn’t true, and I keep going around in circles, desperately wanting to believe something that just seems like wishful thinking.”

Another tear runs down her face, and I catch it with my thumb, my heart bleeding. Five years, and I’m still desperate for her to believe me. I sigh and drop my forehead to hers. “I didn’t cheat on you, Celeste. I swear.”

She begins to cry in earnest, her arms wrapping around me as the sound of heartbreak fills our room. “I’m so scared I got it all wrong,” she whispers, clutching me desperately. “It’s becoming so hard to live with all the pain I’ve caused, with that numbness that only your touch drives away. I’m so tired of being unhappy, Zane.”

I hold her tightly and draw a shaky breath, hope flickering deep inside my aching heart. “Me too, Celestial,” I whisper.

Chapter Sixty-Eight

CELESTE

My mind keeps replaying the way I clung to Zane last night, the way he consoled me. He hasn't breathed a word about it all day, acting completely professional at work. But a few times, I saw him look at me with a soft gaze that made my heart wrench.

I keep going over his words in my mind, unsure of what to believe. Lily once told me there's nothing I wouldn't forgive him for, and I'm scared she was right. Do I want to believe him because it'd make it easier for me to put the past behind us that way? From each seed of doubt he plants in me, another thousand questions sprout, leaving me feeling torn and unsettled.

I sigh and grab the book I was reading, holding it open in front of me as I walk to the living room, desperate to escape into a different world, one where I don't have to face the thoughts I can't make sense of. Sometimes, when my days feel rough, this is the only thing that can make me feel better. Nothing else can make me truly feel *alive* when my own emotions get too heavy.

I sigh happily when I feel the soft carpets in the living room under my feet, glad I made it to my destination without having to take my eyes off the pages. It took months for me to become familiar with Zane's house, but I finally feel at home here, most of the time. I sink onto the sofa, only to gasp at the sound of soft laughter.

“You still do that, huh?” Zane says, startling me so much that I let my book slip through my fingers. It falls closed, and I stare at it in dismay, knowing it’ll now take me a few seconds to find the page I was on. “You really should watch where you’re going, Celeste. Remember that time you stubbed your toe and burst into tears? You made me kiss your toe until the pain was gone.”

I look up at him and freeze, doing a double take. He’s leaning back on the sofa in nothing but a pair of black boxers, his laptop balancing on his knee. His hair is still wet, and the way he’s spread out puts his entire body on display. My eyes zero in on his tattoo, only to drop to his abs when he lifts his hand and runs it through his hair, making his muscles ripple. “I don’t think it was the way you kissed my toe that took away the pain,” I murmur, my cheeks heating as I remember how he’d kissed my foot, and then made his way up my leg until he had his face buried between my legs, his tongue lapping at me and the mint in his mouth making me tingle in the best way. I don’t think I’ve ever come harder than I did that night.

I try my best to look at his face, only for my gaze to drop back to his body a split second later. “I, um,” I stammer, taking in the V below his abs, “I’ll go read in the bedroom. I didn’t mean to intrude.”

I look away and brush my hair behind my ear, unsure how to face him. He’s treated me differently lately, a little more caring, a little more understanding, and I don’t know what to make of it. Without the blatant hatred between us to hide behind, I’m forced to face everything else that still exists between us, everything that shouldn’t be there anymore.

Zane shakes his head and beckons me closer. “Don’t go. I wanted your input on my presentation for the conference we have to attend next month. Could you take a look at this?”

I reluctantly put my book aside and scoot over. “Of course.”

He wraps his arm around the back of the sofa, not quite touching me, but enveloping me all the same as he turns his laptop toward me. It just reminds me of the way he pulled me close last night, and all of a sudden, I’m hit with intense longing.

I lean in and scroll through the slides, reading each of them carefully. “I like this particular slide a lot, but I don’t think the data is presented in a clear enough manner,” I murmur, moving closer to him to edit it. “What was the source? It’s not listed.”

I turn to him when he doesn't answer, only to find him looking at me with an expression that steals my breath. "Sometimes I forget how perfect we were together," he murmurs, his gaze bittersweet. "You always made everything you touched better, and I let myself forget it. It was easier to hold on to the hate, but I'm not sure I want to anymore. Do you?"

I meet his eyes, disarmed by his quiet confession. I hadn't expected that, but perhaps I should have, after last night. "I don't know how to feel anything else anymore," I admit. "Not without feeling guilty."

Zane turns toward me and captures my face, cupping it gently. "Is that so?" He leans in, his gaze dropping to my lips. I inhale sharply when his hand slides down my cheek to my neck. He wraps his hand around it, his thumb resting against my throat as he pulls me closer, until his lips are brushing against mine. "What do you feel when I do this?" My breathing becomes ragged as anticipation builds. Zane softly kisses the edge of my mouth, and I whimper. "Tell me, Celeste."

"Things that I shouldn't," I whisper, my eyes falling closed. That same guilt I've been drowning in tugs at me, reminding me of why I can't have him the way I want him. I've never felt more conflicted. I've never hated myself more for the way I can't seem to get over him.

"What if we just stop fighting?" he asks, his tone a pleading lilt. "What if we just let ourselves feel everything we claim not to?"

He pushes his laptop aside, and I tense when he makes me face him, his grip around my neck tightening. It just reminds me of the way he took me in our dressing room, his gaze heated. The way he makes me the center of his universe when he's buried inside me is addicting, and more and more, I want him to look at me that way, like I'm all he can see.

"I haven't been able to stop thinking about what you said last night, Celeste. You said you're tired of being unhappy, and so am I." My heart skips a beat, and he leans in, his lips brushing over mine. He takes my bottom lip between his teeth and nips at it, his touch filled with frustration. Does he know it makes me weak when he does that?

"I know you, Celestial. If you're reading like that, you're trying to escape. Why not let me be your escape? Why don't we stop hiding behind the hate neither of us truly feels? Give in."

My resolve snaps, and I tilt my head to kiss him. He moans and pulls me onto his lap, making me feel how hard he is for me. "I don't know how to be with you without fighting it," I murmur against his mouth. The only

times I let myself feel everything he elicits in me is when I can hide behind hatred that I don't truly feel, not anymore.

"Me neither," he admits, pulling away a little, his touch rough as his hands roam over my body. "Sometimes I look at you, and my heart just fucking breaks, Celeste. I think of everything you did to me, the way you destroyed us, and the hate feels so fucking real. But then you smile at me, and it all disappears. I don't know how to navigate this thing between us, but I know I want to stop arguing. Can we do that? Even if it's only until we divorce?"

I wrap my arms around him and rest my head against his shoulder. "I don't know," I whisper. "But despite everything, I want to try."

He hugs me tightly, and I find myself wishing he'd never let go. Not now, and not in three years. Guilt immediately follows that thought, and I bury my face against his neck, breathing him in. Would it be okay for me to have this for just a little while?

Chapter Sixty-Nine

CELESTE

Soft humming greets me as I approach the kitchen, and my heart instantly begins to pound, longing washing over me unexpectedly. My hand trembles as I push the door open, finding exactly what I'd suspected — Zane standing behind the stove, still wearing the suit he wore to the office this morning.

He glances over his shoulder and smiles, driving the butterflies in my stomach wild. “Hey,” he murmurs, his expression relaxed, not a hint of his usual distaste and wariness present. He’s been different ever since he told me he was tired of being unhappy too, and it makes me hopeful for something I’m scared to want. I’m worried his recent kindness is simply the result of the pity I must’ve invoked in him when he found me crying in bed, *twice*, and I’m not sure how I feel about it. I never meant to guilt-trip him into treating me differently.

“Hi,” I tell him belatedly, snapping out of my daze. He’s never home at this time, and I haven’t seen him cook since we got married. It always used to be my favorite sight. Zane is always handsome, but there’s something infinitely sexy about the way he looks when he’s cooking. “I didn’t realize you were home,” I murmur.

He nods and beckons me closer. “Could you help me with this?” I take a hesitant step forward, and he smiles as he gestures toward the potatoes on the counter. “I know you’re a pro at peeling these, so will you help me with

this? I wanted to make dauphinoise potatoes for dinner, to go with the sea bass. Be careful with the peeler though.”

I blink in surprise, unsure what to make of his friendliness. It just makes me feel even more lonely — it’s like I’m a friend he feels he needs to support. The peace between us feels fragile, and I’m tempted to break it entirely. I’d rather have his hatred and the passion that comes with that instead of this distant kindness. “Are you... are you having anyone over for dinner?” I ask hesitantly.

“No. Just thought I’d have dinner with my wife.”

I smile involuntarily as I pick up the peeler, my heart beating a bit faster than it did moments ago. There’s something about the way he calls me his *wife* sometimes that just makes me feel so flustered.

“Where is Melissa?” I ask, wondering about our housekeeper. She’s hard to catch, so I’ve only ever had a handful of conversations with her, but she always makes sure I have everything I need, often without me even having to ask for it. I’m not sure how she does it, but she always has dinner warm and ready for me when I get home, no matter the hour, yet I rarely see her.

“I gave her the evening off.”

I nod and watch as Zane pulls off his suit jacket, my cheeks heating when he drapes it over one of the bar stools by his kitchen island before pulling off his tie. I’m mesmerized as his cufflinks follow and the sleeves of his shirt are rolled up, exposing his forearms.

“Like what you see?” he asks, his voice rough.

My eyes snap to his, my breathing a little erratic. “What?” I say dumbly.

Zane smirks, his eyes roaming over my face and pausing on my lips for a moment before he turns back to the stove. I exhale and relax against the counter, my heart pounding wildly and my cheeks flaming. The kitchen has always been a dangerous place for us, and he still looks as sexy as ever with his broad back turned to me.

I sigh as I take in the way his ass looks in those suit pants, and regret hits me hard. I wish we were still close enough for me to walk over and slide my hand down his spine, like I used to. That easy intimacy is gone, and I never realized it before now. Sex isn’t the same as real intimacy — it’s a glimpse of it that just leaves me wanting more of what we used to have.

Zane reaches for something in the cupboard above him, reminding me of the way he’d move behind me every time I stood on my tiptoes to grab

something. I used to wear nothing but his t-shirts, knowing how much he loved seeing me in them, and I'd purposely let them ride up my thighs when I reached for something. His hand would wrap around my waist and his body would press against mine, and that'd be it — dinner would be forgotten as he bent me over the counter.

I draw a shaky breath as I look around his brand new kitchen, doubt tugging at me. Has he done any of that with someone else? Zane loved his old kitchen and refused to change a single thing about it when we were dating. He wouldn't even let me rearrange anything in the cupboards. Who did he change it for? I bite down on my lip as my memories turn to painful visions of him giving everything that used to be mine to someone else.

Before I even realize what I'm doing, I'm halfway across the room. Zane looks up just as I wrap my hand around his arm and rise to my tiptoes. Something flashes in his expression when my other hand slides around the back of his neck in the seconds before I pull him toward me, my lips finding his.

It's a hesitant kiss, one filled with suppressed emotions, one that reveals I don't know what I'm doing or why. Zane freezes for a moment, and I begin to pull back, a deep kind of shame and rejection settling in my stomach — but then he grabs my hair and tilts my face, kissing me harder, deeper. I moan against his lips, and he grabs my waist, a move he's performed a thousand times before. My legs wrap around his waist instinctively as he turns us around and places me on top of the counter, my body moving against his as he cups my face.

I'm panting when he pulls back to look at me, his gaze searching. My heart thuds loudly in my chest as I look into his eyes, feeling more vulnerable than ever before. This feels different — there's no anger today, no excuses to explain away what I just did. My gaze is pleading as I pull him back to me, and he comes willingly, kissing me all over again, slower now, more intentional.

Things have been changing between us. I think it started at my parents' house, when I first saw his tattoo, and my heart wavered, only for it to start beating for him all over again when he held me in his arms as I cried about everything I lost. He consoled me instead of punishing me for my mistakes, and I knew then that things would never be the same, not for me.

I slide my hand down to his chest, and his breath hitches when I begin to unbutton his shirt. It falls open just as he reaches for my blouse, lifting it

up and over my head in one smooth motion. His eyes darken when he sees the turquoise bra I'm wearing, and the way he bites his lip makes me tighten my legs around him. I reach for his tattoo, the tips of my fingers caressing his chest gently, almost like I'm scared this moment between us will break.

Zane threads his hand through my hair and sighs, his gaze as emotional as mine. My hand trembles as I place it over his cheek, my heart aching. He's right here, and I miss him more than words could convey.

Zane's forehead drops to mine, and he inhales shakily before tilting his face, kissing me softly, tenderly. His hand slips underneath my skirt, and I undo his belt, loving the way his abs tense as I push my hand into his pants to free his cock. "Fuck, *Celestial*," he murmurs against my lips, and my heart skips a beat. He rarely calls me that these days. Does he know that I savor each instance?

His fingers trail over my underwear, and I deepen our kiss when he pushes it aside to slip two fingers into me. "More," I moan, and he smiles against my mouth before sucking my bottom lip between his teeth for a moment, biting down before letting go.

"What do you want, baby?"

"You," I reply instantly, wondering whether he realizes what I'm asking for. It's not just his body I want, not anymore.

He pulls back a little and grabs his cock, lining it up perfectly. "You have me," he whispers, his words a false promise. His eyes are on mine as he pushes into me, slowly, intentionally. "You'll always have a part of me, Celeste, whether I like it or not."

Chapter Seventy

CELESTE

“What are you doing?” Zane asks, and I whirl around in surprise, my eyes widening when I realize he’s home. “You’ve been pacing in the hallway for ten minutes, Celeste.”

I stare at him blankly. He’s been doing this more and more often lately — coming home a little earlier than usual. Zane hasn’t eaten with me since the day we nearly burned the dinner we’d been cooking, but he’s no longer avoiding me entirely. He’ll walk in just as I finish eating the dinner our housekeeper made, and we’ll make some small talk about the upcoming conference we’re hosting before he heads to his home office.

For the last three days, he’s even been coming to bed before I fall asleep, whispering goodnight before turning away from me, leaving me staring at his broad back and wishing I could press my face against it and hug him tightly.

“I... um... your grandmother asked me to come volunteer at the soup kitchen she hosts in our hotels,” I tell him, my words tumbling out in a rush when I realize I’ve just been staring at him blankly for a few moments.

Understanding crosses his face. “Sierra and Raven will be there,” he murmurs, nodding. I glance down at my feet, quietly wondering if he remembers that this is the charity event they’d brought me to in their attempts to help me win over Grandma Anne. It hurts to know if I go there now, it’s the two of them who wouldn’t want me there.

Zane walks up to me and gently brushes one of my curls behind my ear. “Come on. I’ll drive you. Which hotel is it at this month?”

I look up at him in surprise. “The Lacara.”

He nods and wraps his hand around my waist as he walks me out. He’s doing that a bit more often now, touching me when it’s just the two of us, and no one else to pretend for. Zane walks me to the passenger seat and opens the door for me. I glance up at him, my heart skipping a beat. Does he realize he’s started to do that again?

It’s becoming harder to hold on to the pain and hatred I entered this marriage with. I could never forget, not fully, but more and more, I find myself *wanting to*. The guilt is fading, replaced by a longing for happiness — the kind I’ve only ever felt with him.

Zane’s hand wraps over my knee as he drives me to the hotel, his thumb drawing soothing circles. “Why are you so kind to me lately?” I ask, my voice breaking.

He glances at me and pulls his hand away, placing it back on the steering wheel. “I told you once that I wouldn’t spend years of my life in constant battle with you, and I meant it.” Zane glances at me then, a sweet smile on his face. “Is that okay with you, Celeste? Is it alright for me to show a little bit of kindness to my own wife?”

I look away, scared my emotions are written all over my face. I’ve never felt so conflicted before. I’m falling for him all over again despite my best attempts not to, and I’m not sure what to do about it. It feels like a sin, a betrayal, and I’m tired of feeling that way. I’m so desperate for the moments of happiness I feel with him, and their allure is becoming too hard to resist.

I wrap my arms around myself when he parks in front of The Lacara, one of the Windsors’ most luxurious hotels. Zane gets out of the car and jogs around it, startling me when he opens the door for me and offers me his hand.

I look into his eyes as I take it, and he smiles at me. “I’ll come with you. It’s been a while since I volunteered, and I’m free tonight.”

My heart warms, and he gently brushes my hair out of my face before pulling his hands away abruptly, like he realized he was touching me in a way he didn’t mean to. He throws me a smile before heading to the entrance, and I follow him in, my nerves increasing with each step I take. I’m not sure how to face Raven and Sierra, and I don’t want my presence to

hurt them. I've started to come to family dinner every week, but they've gotten used to pretending I'm not there at all, and I've gotten used to keeping my eyes on my plate. I don't want it to be that way, but I don't know how to fix things either.

Zane glances back at me and sighs, his hand slipping into mine. I hold on to him tightly as we walk into the ballroom together, leaning on him for strength. Grandma Anne smiles when she sees me, but both Raven and Sierra's expressions harden. Their eyes drop to our entwined fingers, and my entire body tenses. I move to pull my hand out of Zane's, but he recaptures it before it slips away.

"Zane," Grandma Anne says, her expression unreadable. "What a pleasant surprise," she adds, her tone in contrast with her words. "I didn't invite you."

He shrugs and lets go of me to catch the aprons she throws at him. "This is my hotel. It's not that surprising I'd be here."

She rolls her eyes and turns away to give instructions to those around her, and Zane hands me one of the aprons. "Tie this for me?" he murmurs, and I nod as he turns around.

"Don't you want to take off your suit jacket?" I ask as I grab the apron's strings. He joined me impulsively and didn't take the time to change into something he'd be more comfortable in. "You'll get hot if you keep it on."

He looks over his shoulder and grins at me, his expression mischievous. "Celestial," he murmurs, his tone teasing. "If you want to undress me, you'll have to wait till we get home."

I part my lips in shock, and he chuckles as he straightens. It doesn't occur to me until he's tying my apron moments later that his playfulness helped me relax a little.

Raven whispers something to Sierra, and they both burst out laughing. It hurts, to see them together like that, knowing that once upon a time, I was one of them. Zane places his hand on my lower back and guides me toward them silently. "What can we help with?" he asks.

Sierra looks at me, and for the first time since I married Zane, her gaze isn't filled with hostility. Instead, she just stares at me with a hint of uncertainty. "Help me make the soup base," she says quietly.

I nod and jump into action straight away, Zane by my side. He stirs as I slowly add the ingredients, my hands trembling. "Careful with the salt," she tells me. "Last time I overdid it a little, and I felt so bad. They kept telling

me they liked it, but I know it wasn't great. Many of our regulars look forward to these meals, so be careful."

I look at her in surprise. "Of course," I murmur, hoping I won't mess this up. She hasn't spoken this many words to me in a while, and even though I want to, I'm not sure how to keep the conversation going.

Raven glances over, her eyes roaming over my outfit. "That's from my first collection," she says, frowning as she stares at the embellishments on my sleeves. I pull my hand toward my chest, flustered. I've had this blouse for so long that I grabbed it without thinking. Raven smiles at me, genuinely, for the first time in years. "I'll send you some of my newer stuff. You're a Windsor now, Celeste. That means you're now officially one of my unpaid brand ambassadors." She hesitates and shakes her head. "But then again, you always have been, haven't you?"

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Chapter Seventy-One

CELESTE

I stare up at the Windsor private jet with trepidation, and Zane offers me his hand silently, like he understands my hesitation. He entwines our fingers as he leads me onto the plane, and I glance around uneasily, remembering the last time we were on here. Hatred radiated off him then, and despite our recent ceasefire, it feels like it's still bubbling just below the surface half the time. We have more good moments than bad these days, but it still feels like I'm walking on the edge of a knife with him.

"Mr. and Mrs. Windsor," Mike says, startling me. "Champagne?"

Zane and I take in his red suit with blue squares on it, and we exchange a look before simultaneously schooling our features and accepting the glasses he hands us. Mike guides us to the seats he seems to have chosen, not caring about our preferences, and we follow along, having learned it's best to choose our battles with Mike. He seats us opposite each other in luxurious armchairs, a bright smile on his face as he tells us the duration of our flight and everything we need to know about the conference we're attending.

I stare after him when he walks away and shudder a little, earning myself a laugh from Zane. "Seriously, what's the deal with his suits?" I whisper before taking a sip of my champagne.

Zane leans in, his knees brushing against mine. "Fuck if I know. I once asked him about it, and he looked me dead in the eye and said: *It's fashion.*

You wouldn't know anything about it."

I burst out laughing, and Zane watches me with a sweet smile on his face, something surprisingly tender in his expression. "To be fair," I murmur. "You *don't* know anything about fashion. You just wear what Raven tells you to."

He grins and moves closer. "Your entire wardrobe consists of Raven Windsor Couture too," he teases, only for his gaze to soften. "It did even before you married me. You've been following her career and supporting her business from the start, haven't you?"

I blink in surprise and look away, somehow unable to admit to it. It makes me feel a little pathetic, because I know she never needed my support — not considering her own background and her marriage to Ares. I suppose if I'm honest, it's something I did more for myself than for her. It made me feel close to her.

Zane studies me as the plane takes off, and I take another sip of champagne in an attempt to keep my hands busy. His gaze unnerves me these days, and my instinct is to snap at him to break the tension. It's the only way I know how to communicate with him anymore, and unlearning it is proving to be difficult. We're in this odd in-between space where we can no longer disguise our lust as hatred, but neither of us is willing to take the first step either. Maybe we've both been hurt too much, and maybe he's as scared as I am.

"Careful," Zane warns, just as turbulence hits, sending the liquor flying all over my white blouse. I grimace, and he leans back in his seat as he watches me, something dark and heavy in his gaze as he watches the drops of champagne roll down into my cleavage. "There's a shower in the bedroom," he murmurs, his voice rough. "I'll show you when the plane steadies."

He stares at me hard, desire dancing in his eyes, and it emboldens me, makes me want to keep his gaze on me. Things have changed so much between us lately, but it's not enough. He makes me selfish and irrational, and I can't stop wanting more. I'm desperate for more moments when he looks at me like nothing else matters.

I run my hands over my blouse and nod. "That would be great," I murmur, undoing the top button with trembling hands. "I should get out of this."

Zane clenches his jaw, his breathing erratic as his eyes roam over the red bra that's visible through the wet fabric. He bites his fist when I continue to unbutton my blouse. It falls open, and I smile when he squirms in his seat.

A soft whimper escapes my throat when he grabs his cock over his pants to reposition it, and I glance around us to ensure we're truly all alone. "Even my bra is wet," I whisper, my fingers tugging at the front closure. It comes undone, and a feral look flashes through Zane's eyes.

"Stop it," he growls, breathing hard.

I cup my breasts, hiding them from his view. "Stop what?" I ask, throwing him an innocent look.

"Celeste," he threatens, just before I pull my hands away. "If you don't stop right now, I'm going to assume you want me to drop to my knees and lick every last drop of champagne off your body. I won't stop until I've got my face buried between your pretty legs and you're coming on my tongue."

My lips part in surprise, and I hesitate for a moment, my decision made before it even registers. I look into his eyes as I tease my nipples with my thumbs, drawing circles around them the way he likes doing, and he groans.

Zane undoes his seatbelt and kneels in front of me, his gaze flashing with possessiveness as he parts my legs, making my skirt ride up. "Fucking crazy girl," he murmurs, before wrapping his hand around the back of my neck and kissing me roughly.

I wrap my ankles around his torso and pull him closer as he swallows down my moans. "Zane," I whimper when he pulls his lips off mine and lowers them to my chest, kissing and lapping up the champagne on my skin, just like he told me he would. I wrap my hand in his hair as he undoes my seatbelt and pulls me to the edge of my seat, his touch rough as he lifts my legs over his shoulder.

"You still don't know how to listen," he says, before ripping my lace underwear apart with his teeth. I moan when I feel his hot breath on me, and he chuckles against my skin, his eyes on mine as his tongue darts out to taste me.

"Oh God," I whisper, every rational thought fading away as I watch my husband tease me, my hands in his hair and his tongue on my clit. I forgot how good he is at this, how well he knows my body.

Zane pushes two fingers into me and curls them, and it brings me right to the edge. "Please," I whisper, repeating the word over and over again.

He groans at the sound of my pleas, and I tighten my grip on his hair. “Come for me, Goddess,” he orders, and I do. There’s no resisting him when he knows my body better than anyone else. I moan his name, and he continues to stroke me with his tongue as I ride wave after wave of pure bliss.

The way he still wants me is so reassuring, and it just undoes me. When he touches me, it’s like everything disappears, leaving nothing but the very essence of us. I wish I could exist solely in these moments, when neither the past nor the future matters.

When he pulls away to look at me, his eyes are filled with something that makes my heart race. He smiles tenderly as he reaches for me. “Next time you want something, just tell me, Celestial,” he whispers as he brushes my hair out of my face. “I’m not the kind of man that’d deny his wife anything.”

I stare at him, my chest aching as an unbidden thought drifts through my mind, one that steals my breath. If I asked for his heart, would he give me that too?

Chapter Seventy-Two

ZANE

Celeste pauses with her lipstick in hand when I step out of the shower, her eyes meeting mine in the mirror. She draws a shaky breath, her gaze darkening with desire.

I'm not sure what I was thinking when I reserved the same room we had years ago at this same conference, back when I tried my hardest to win over her grandfather. It wasn't mere nostalgia that led me to do this, but I can't quite define what it is either. Is it because I want to remind her of everything she destroyed? Or because I want to recreate the nights we shared here? I'm not sure, and that's the problem with Celeste. The longer I'm married to her, the less sure I am that I'll be able to walk away from her when our time is up. I don't know what I want from her anymore, but I do know I want her.

I can't see a future with her, not with the way my family feels about her and the way we can't trust each other, but fuck, I love her. I just wish that was enough, that the rest didn't matter.

She watches me as I dry off and tries her hardest to pretend she's focused on her makeup. I can't help but smirk, enjoying the way she gives me her attention. She looks fucking stunning standing there in nothing but another set of stupidly sexy lingerie — red, this time. She's got her back turned to me, most of her ass on display, and fuck, she's my greatest fantasy come to life.

She catches me looking and smirks, satisfaction flashing through her eyes as she turns to face me, giving me a better view. There's something about those fucking things she wears to keep her stockings up — it's fucking irresistible. Just the sight of it makes me want to kneel between her legs and worship her pussy.

I walk up to her with nothing but a towel around my waist, and she stares at me the way she did on the plane and again last night, with a hint of desperation. A few stray drops of water run down my chest, and my beautiful wife follows them intently, her hungry gaze making my cock throb.

One hand wraps into her hair, and she sucks in a breath when the tips of my fingers run down the side of her neck and over her bra. "Who is this for?" I ask, irrational jealousy settling deep in my chest. She's been quiet since we got here, and I can't help but wonder if it's because she knows Clifton will be here too. Is she planning to sneak away at some point, the way she used to sneak around with me?

I still remember the way she taunted me when we were first forced together. She told me she wouldn't stop seeing him, that even if she married me, she'd only ever love him. The memory sickens me. I spent years trying to get over her, and she fell in love with someone else so easily. It hurts even more that it was him. When I'm touching her, her entire attention is on me, but who is it that occupies her thoughts when I can't drown them out with desire? Is it him?

I tip her face up to mine, my grip on her hair tightening as she places her hand over my chest, the tips of her fingers brushing over my tattoo. "You," she says, her tone pleading, like she can read the insecurity I'm trying to hide. "It's for you."

I slide my hand around her waist, my touch eager, impatient. She whimpers when I grab her ass and squeeze tightly. "It'd better be," I warn her, fisting my hand in her hair as I pull her closer, my lips finding hers. The moment our lips meet, she rises to her tiptoes and wraps her arms around my neck, deepening our kiss. There's something so reassuring about the way she melts into me, and my touch softens, my anger draining away. I fucking hate that she still has so much power over me, and I don't think her hold will ever loosen.

Her hand wraps around my cheek and she pulls away a little to look at me, that same vulnerability I'm feeling present in her eyes. "Celeste

Windsor,” I tell her. “That’s your name now. Don’t you dare forget it.”

I’d expected her to snap at my harsh tone, but she just stares at me for a moment, and then smiles. “I’m well aware that I’m your wife, Zane,” she whispers, her gaze filled with a hint of heartache and torment. It’s like she both loves and hates the fact that she’s mine, and fuck, I feel the same way.

I take a step away, and she grabs my hand, the two of us staring at each other for a moment, so much left unspoken. It’s like we’re on the cusp of something new, or perhaps, something that used to be, but neither of us knows how to navigate our newfound normal. “We’ll be late,” I murmur, and she nods, letting go of me with a hint of reluctance that disarms me.

I watch her for a moment as she turns around and begins to get dressed, my heart racing. Fuck. Five years, and I’m still in love with her. She’s been different ever since she had that nightmare about Lily, and the way she looks at me has changed. Now, when she looks into my eyes, there’s no hatred — just questions I don’t have answers to. Years ago, I’d have given the world to be in this situation with her, where she’s at least open to the idea of me telling the truth, but now? It’s too little, too late.

We’re both quiet as we head down to the ballroom the conference is being held in, her body brushing against mine in the elevator. My heart wrenches as I think back to the way she hooked her pinky around mine back then, and when I glance at her, the look in her eyes makes me think she’s remembering it too.

Something flashes in her gaze when I wrap my hand around hers and entwine our fingers, the way I couldn’t back then. She searches my face, and I do the same, neither of us quite sure what we’re hoping to find.

She sighs when we reach the ground floor, her expression shuttering closed as she faces forward, and I tighten my grip on her as we walk out, finding myself entirely unable to let go.

“Celeste?”

A chill runs down my spine at the sound of a familiar voice, my mood sinking when I spot Clifton Emerson. He pushes off the wall like he’s been waiting for my wife, just like he did back then. She tenses, and he pauses mid-step when he notices our joined hands.

The heartache that crosses his face would’ve made me pity him if it wasn’t my wife he coveted. I tighten my grip on Celeste, and she squeezes back, almost like she’s trying to reassure me.

“Cliff,” she says, her voice carrying a hint of affection that irritates me to no end. It’s crazy how easily she affects my emotions, even after all these years.

Clifton looks at her like he wants to pull her away from me and take her in his arms, and I grin at him tauntingly, taking comfort in the fact she hasn’t tried to wrench herself free from me. She was mine then, and she’s mine now.

He averts his gaze like he knows what I’m thinking and focuses on Celeste instead, neither of us bothering to greet the other. “I missed you,” he tells my wife, his tone conveying his sincerity. It fucking guts me to see the way her expression softens, and I wait with bated breath to hear her reply, my heart on the verge of breaking.

“It’s so good to see you,” she says, and my shoulders relax, air rushing back into my lungs. I smile and let go of her hand to wrap it around her waist instead, pulling her closer. She comes willingly and leans into me like it’s the most natural thing to do, like she belongs with me.

Clifton looks away, but he fails to hide his longing and despair. I don’t have it in me to feel sorry for him. “You got here later than you said you would,” he says, his tone accusatory. “I thought you said you’d arrive last night? I called you, but you didn’t pick up.”

My entire body goes rigid, and I clench my jaw to keep my silence. She spoke to him? Told him what time she’d arrive? Why the fuck would she do that?

“We did arrive last night,” she says, heat rushing to her cheeks. Is she thinking of what went down moments after we walked into our room? She certainly wasn’t thinking of Clifton when she turned around halfway across our suite, her beautiful amber eyes dripping with need as she reminded me I’d told her I wouldn’t deny her anything, if she just asked. He wasn’t on her mind as she dropped to her knees and repaid me for the way I buried my face between her legs on the plane.

Clifton’s eyes flash with disappointment, and I bite back a smile as I analyze Celeste’s behavior, learning something interesting that my anger prevented me from seeing before. I study my wife carefully as we walk into the conference room, noting the way she looks at Clifton and interacts with him. Every few seconds, her gaze moves back to me, and I grin as I follow along quietly, enjoying the way my mere presence gets on Clifton’s nerves.

Sometimes, it's like history repeats itself with her. Once again, I find myself seated next to Celeste, with Clifton on her other side. This time, however, I place my hand in her lap, my palm turned up. My wife places her hand in mine, and I smirk as the presentation starts. It's some bullshit about the advances in 3D modeling, and the entire time, I just focus on the feel of our intertwined fingers.

Celeste leans into me halfway through the presentation, letting me know she's taking a quick bathroom break, and I tense, cold dread washing over me. I'm instantly reminded of the way we disappeared together, and she must know what I'm thinking, because she throws me a reassuring smile before she walks away.

I glance at Clifton, making sure he doesn't follow her, and he looks back at me, his gaze challenging. Something akin to anger flickers through his eyes as I grab my trusty tin of peppermint candy and pop one into my mouth. He frowns at it, pure despair taking over his entire demeanor.

"It won't last," he says. "You two fell apart once. It'll happen again. When it does, I'll be where I've always been, right here, waiting for her."

I lean back in my seat, quietly confident for the first time in years. I didn't even realize he knew we dated years ago, and I'm oddly pleased to learn my wife told him about us. "If our marriage doesn't last, you *will be* where you've always been, Clifton. On the sidelines, pining after a woman that'll always be mine." I'm not sure what it is about us these days, but I just know I'm right. We've hurt each other fatally throughout the years, but through it all, I've been hers as much as she's been mine. Even if we don't make it, that won't change. The defeat in his eyes tells me he knows it too.

I smirk as I rise from my seat, intent on intercepting my wife and pulling her into the closest utility room. When she sits back down next to him, I want her to remember who the fuck she belongs to, once and for all.

Chapter Seventy-Three

CELESTE

My entire body is tingling as I sit down next to Clifton, my heart still racing from the way Zane grabbed my wrist and pulled me into an empty utility closet with him. There was something so exhilarating about the way we relived our past in those few stolen moments. The way he still wants me is surreal, and nothing will ever come close to that moment when he pushes into me. I'm never quite sure I can take all of him, and he makes me take it anyway. The way he just possesses me drives me crazy, makes me desperate for more.

"Everything okay?" Clifton asks, his gaze searching my face. Whatever he finds makes his expression fall, and I look down, unable to face him when my lace underwear is *drenched*. Just like he did years ago, Zane pushed his cum back into me and told me to think of him as I sit back down next to Clifton — like I could've thought of anything but him even if he hadn't done that.

"Y-Yeah," I murmur, flustered. I squeeze my legs together, unable to keep my heart from racing. I'm developing an addiction to these glimpses of the past, and I can't help but want more of this pure happiness. There's no hatred in Zane's touch anymore, and each time we have sex, it's like he wants me to remember how good we used to be together. I didn't think we'd ever be able to move past the blame, but I'm beginning to see that he truly meant it when he told me he's just as tired of being unhappy as I am.

Zane grins at me as he walks onto the stage for his presentation, and I lean back in my seat, oddly proud of my husband. He puts so much effort into every single thing he does, and I know how much time it took him to prepare for this conference. I've spent hours helping him create the slides, and all the while, it amazed me how much he cares.

Zane never gatekeeps information, and it's one of the things I appreciate most about him. It's rare for someone as successful as him to get onto a stage and freely share what he's learned, knowing it'll only aid his competition. It makes it even harder to believe he could've done what he did. It seems out of character, and with each month of marriage that passes, I grow more scared that he truly didn't lie when he denied Lily's allegations. I'm not sure how to handle the implications of that, and the mere thought of it terrifies me. If Zane didn't lie, then Lily did, and she couldn't possibly have done that to me. She wouldn't have. The pain in her expression was real, and it makes this entire situation all the more confusing.

"You can barely take your eyes off him," Clifton says, his voice soft. I glance at him, something bittersweet lodging in my chest. In the last five years, Clifton has been such a good friend to me, and it hurts to see him look at me that way, like I've betrayed him.

"I'm sorry," I whisper, unsure what I'm even apologizing for. Our engagement was never real, after all. Despite that, we both knew he wanted it to be.

He sighs and reaches for me, his touch gentle as he pushes my hair out of my face. It's something he's done countless times throughout the years, often when he inevitably found me crying after a few drinks. "Don't be," he murmurs, his eyes on mine. "I knew, deep down. I think you did too. One way or another, you were always going to end up back in his arms. You're as in love with him as you used to be."

My eyes widen, and I shake my head. "No, it isn't like that between us," I tell him. I'm not sure what it is, but it isn't love.

"Isn't it?" he asks, his gaze roaming over my face. "Then why is it that each time I see you two together, your lipstick is smeared? When he's in the room, it's like no one else exists, Celeste. I wonder if that's what I wanted — maybe I just wanted someone to look at me the way you look at Zane Windsor. He nearly bankrupted you, yet here you are, giving him

everything I've always wanted. That's what hurts the most, you know? He doesn't deserve it."

I lower my gaze, unable to face Cliff, unable to refute his words. "He makes me feel alive again," I whisper, scared to even admit it. "Is that really so bad?"

When Lily died, I lost part of myself too, until Zane walked back into my life. Slowly but surely, I'm rediscovering what it's like to be happy, to experience real joy. I know I should feel guilty, that I should keep in mind who he is and what he's done, but the truth of the matter is that no one else has ever made me feel this way.

The way I feel right now reminds me of Lily, and I can't help but wonder if it's a kind of karma. Is life showing me her torment? I feel like I'm walking on the edge of a knife, savoring each moment of happiness, yet knowing it can't last. Each touch we share is followed by intense guilt, but I can't stop either. Maybe she was right, and I have begun to forgive Zane. I think back to the way she cried as she told me she couldn't be around to watch me marry him, and in the end, that's exactly what I did. Even worse is that I'm tired of feeling guilty about it.

Lily once wrote that she'd hoped Zane would understand what it's like to lose everything he holds dear in life, to look around and find the broken pieces of his heart in each place that had become meaningful simply because of the memories made there. I'd never expected the reverse to be true too. I'm recovering the shards of my broken heart in every memory we relive, every emotion he makes me feel when I thought I'd lost my ability to feel anything at all.

I glance back at Zane to find his attention on Cliff and me, his jaw set and pure fury radiating off him. It hits me then — he's jealous. I'd wondered if he'd been thinking about Clifton when he asked me who my lingerie was for in the morning, right before reminding me I'm his. When he pulled me into the utility closet, his touch was more fervent than usual too, almost like he felt insecure. The thought brings a smile to my face, and it lights a spark of hope deep inside my heart.

Zane grips his microphone tightly and forces a smile for the audience as he wraps up his presentation, his eyes never leaving mine. "Of course, none of this information would've been made available to you if not for the help of *my wife*, Celeste Windsor," he says, his polite tone doing nothing to hide

the underlying possessiveness. Cliff tenses beside me, but I merely smile back at my husband, the butterflies in my stomach going wild.

I watch as he exits the stage, barely even noticing the women who flock to him with supposed questions. His entire attention is on me, and I revel in it as I rise to my feet and take a step toward him. There's something so empowering about being Zane Windsor's wife, and I can't help but smile at him. It throws him off, takes the edge off his anger.

He pauses in front of me, his gaze cutting to Clifton for a moment, until I cup his face and rise to my tiptoes to kiss his cheek. "You did so well," I whisper, my lips lingering. "I'm so proud of you."

Zane's hand threads through my hair, and he holds me in place, his eyes finding mine. There's something so vulnerable in his gaze, and it makes my heart skip a beat. He sighs and tightens his grip on my hair, pulling me closer. He hesitates a beat, and then he kisses me in the middle of this packed conference room, not giving a damn about the whispers. I smile against his lips and kiss him back with all I've got, my arms wrapping around his neck, the tips of my fingers trailing over his nape the way he likes.

We're both panting when his forehead drops to mine, and he dips in for another kiss, a chaste one this time, before he takes a step back, his gaze searching. It's hard to ignore that spark of hope in his eyes as he raises a brow in question, and it's harder still to ignore the way my heart skips a beat in response.

"I'm just tired of being unhappy," I whisper as a way to explain my actions just now.

The edges of his lips turn up into a bittersweet smile, and he leans in, his mouth hovering over mine. "Then let's stop, Celestial. Let's stop being unhappy."

I sigh when he kisses me, softly, taking his time, neither of us caring who sees. It's moments like these that make life worth living — and that's what I want to do, more than anything. I just want to live.

Chapter Seventy-Four

ZANE

“You don’t have to do this if you don’t want to,” Celeste tells me as we pull up in front of her parents’ house.

I grin at her and throw her an amused look. “And risk you telling your mom that I’m too busy stuffing my hands in cow shit? No fucking way, Celeste.”

She bites back a smile, and I turn in my seat, my gaze roaming over the pink dress she’s wearing. “Besides, didn’t we decide we weren’t going to be unhappy any longer? Things will never be the way they used to be, but until we divorce, we could...” I hesitate, unable to find the right words, and she nods in understanding.

“Co-exist?” my wife fills in, even though that’s not quite right either.

“Something like that.”

Celeste has started to come to so many Windsor events with me lately that it wouldn’t be fair if I didn’t return the favor. If I’m truly honest, though, it’s hardly any effort to see her family. I love being around them, and each time I see them, it feels like my relationship with them improves a little more.

Celeste smiles at me, and fuck if it doesn’t make my heart skip a beat. I sigh and reach for her, twirling one of her curls around my finger as I lose myself in her eyes. Lately, she’s been looking at me the way she used to, and it’s intoxicating. When she smiles at me, it’s like the past disappears,

and all that exists is the moment she's trapped me in. I'd be lying if I said I'm not scared that this is all another act, but at the same time, I know I'll take whatever she gives me. It's pathetic, but I can't help it.

"We'd better go inside," I murmur. "Your mom is quite terrifying. I'm honestly scared to be even a minute late."

Celeste bursts out laughing, and I grin back at her before getting out of the car and jogging around it to open the door for her. The way she looks up at me when I offer her my hand brightens up my whole day, and my heart beats just a little faster as I entwine our fingers. Even if this is all just an illusion, even if it can't last, I want this with her. It's foolish, and I know it, but I can't help myself when it comes to her. I never could.

My wife pulls me through her parents' house, the sound of laughter beckoning us toward the living room. "There you are!" Archer says, smiling up at both of us. My eyes widen in surprise, and Celeste lets go of me to hug her brother, an excited squeal escaping her lips when he lifts her off the floor.

I smile at them despite the odd ache in my chest. It's strange to be standing here, right where I always wanted to be — Celeste was always the woman of my dreams, and Archer was the best friend I never got to have as a Windsor. I've got both of them back in my life, but at the same time, I don't. Not really. It's such a jarring feeling, and I try my hardest to push it aside.

"What are you doing here?" Celeste asks, pulling back to look at him.

Archer smiles at her, but I notice the way his eyes roam over her face in barely disguised concern. He looks at me and smiles tightly. "Promised Zane a drink," he says. He's wondering if I'll keep the promise he asked for when I married Celeste, and it's obvious he's worried about his sister.

Celeste's gaze travels between the two of us, her expression betraying her curiosity, and I can't help but smile when she looks into my eyes. I shake my head gently, answering her unspoken question, reassuring her that there's nothing to worry about. It occurs to me then — we're doing what we used to, communicating silently. When did we start doing that again?

Things have been different between us ever since we got back from the conference. We're spending more time with each other now — most nights, we have dinner together and spend the evening talking and watching TV, like we used to. We go to bed together, and each night, I'll pull her against

me, and she'll tip her head up, her gaze pleading for a kiss. It never stops at a mere kiss, and I always end up waking up with her hair in my face.

Our little ceasefire feels precarious, and it often feels like we're walking on eggshells around each other, both of us carefully avoiding any topic that could upset the other. It's no way to live, but fuck, I wish it could last forever.

"Before you three start drinking and disappear," Clara says, holding up a deck of cards. "We'll play! With real cards this time, since Archer is home."

Celeste throws me an excited look, and I grin as I sink into what I've come to consider *my* spot on the sofa. My wife sits down next to me, her thigh pressed against mine and my arm on the back of the sofa, behind her.

George nods at me. "You staying over, son? It's not often that Archer and you are both here."

I glance at him, never any less surprised that he welcomed me back into his family so easily after everything I did to them. For years, I did all I could to push them to the brink of bankruptcy, never quite pushing them over the edge, but never allowing them to truly recover either. Yet sitting here, it's like none of that ever happened, like the past truly can just be that — the past.

Celeste places her hand on my knee and looks up at me, a hint of concern flickering through her beautiful amber eyes. "We don't have to," she says, and my heart skips a beat as I tuck a stray strand of hair behind her ear before nodding at my father-in-law.

My wife smiles at me so sweetly my heart wrenches, and I grin back at her, unable to help myself. I know this is foolish, and I should put a stop to the feelings that continue to grow, but fuck, I just don't want to. I'd rather deal with the eventual pain when she inevitably lets me down again than not have these moments at all.

We begin to play one of the games that Archer, George, and I spent many hours inventing over far too many bottles of whiskey, all because we could never beat the girls at any of the games they chose. The three of us share conspiratorial looks, only to find ourselves losing to Celeste and Clara. "Maybe we're out of practice," I mutter, shrugging.

Archer narrows his eyes and points a finger at his sister. "You're cheating."

My wife looks up at him innocently — too innocently. “How could I possibly? I barely even understand this game. Didn’t you make up the rules yourself?”

Archer stares at her, and then he glances at me, his brow raised. “Zane, you’re sitting right next to her. She’s cheating, isn’t she?”

I glance at my wife, who looks at me like she’s daring me to side with Archer, and I bite back a smile as I place my hand on her thigh, subtly pushing the card she hid under her skirt further out of view. Celeste’s lips part in shock, and I try my hardest to stifle my laughter. Did she really think I wouldn’t notice?

Her eyes are wide with panic as I dip my head down to hers, my lips brushing against her ear. “My silence will cost you,” I warn her.

She bites down on her lip and turns her face, her nose brushing against mine as she leans in to whisper into my ear. “Don’t say a thing, and when we go to bed tonight... I’ll suck you off just the way you like it, letting you push all the way down my throat. I’ll let you fuck my face until you come, and I’ll swallow every last drop.”

Fuck. *Fuck*. Just like that, my cock hardens, right in her parents’ living room. I squirm, my face no doubt heated as she pulls away with the most innocent look in her eyes. I drape my arm over my lap strategically and straighten my spine. It used to be like this between us, and the way we’re slowly falling back into everything that made us *us* is fucking exhilarating.

“I asked her, and she didn’t cheat,” I tell Archer.

He stares at me in disbelief. “You... *asked* her,” he repeats, his expression rapidly becoming stormy as he looks between the two of us. “This is some bullshit,” he says, throwing his cards down on the table in mock anger, when there’s no malice in his expression at all. Clara bursts out laughing, and George sends me an exasperated yet amused look.

“*You*,” Archer says as he rises to his feet and throws me a pointed look. “Let’s go have a drink.”

“You’re such a sore loser,” Celeste teases, and I bite back a smile, squeezing her knee briefly before getting up to follow Archer. George gets up too, and Celeste moves to rest her head against her mother’s shoulder, her eyes following me as I move through the room. I smile at her before walking out, my heart feeling *whole* for the first time in years.

Both men are quiet as we head to George’s office, and I sit down in my usual seat, ready for the questions I know they’ll have. “Looks like you’ll

keep that promise after all,” Archer says, his tone calm and collected, none of his earlier supposed outrage present. If anything, he looks relieved. “She looks happier than I’ve seen her in years. When I spoke to her a few weeks ago, she’d seemed really sad, and I’d been so worried that I booked a flight. I’m glad my worries were unwarranted.”

I think back to the way she cried herself to sleep a couple of weeks ago, and the nightmares I can’t always wake her from. Those things have brought us closer, but they’re also stark reminders of what stands between us. “It’s not easy,” I admit, my voice soft.

“No marriage is, son,” George says as he pours me a drink. “But the good parts are worth it, aren’t they?”

I smile to myself, unable to deny it. “Yeah,” I murmur, raising my glass to my lips. “She’s worth it.”

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Chapter Seventy-Five

CELESTE

I glance at the clock in my childhood bedroom impatiently and sigh. When Zane has a drink with Archer and Dad, it never is just one drink. I lie back in bed and stare up at the ceiling in annoyance, the minutes trickling by until finally, my bedroom door opens.

I sit up and clutch my sheets, my heart instantly beginning to pound wildly as I watch Zane walk in wearing nothing but a towel, stray drops of water running down his chest. The door closes behind him, and he leans against it, his entire attention on me. “You owe me something, don’t you, Goddess?” he murmurs, his gaze heated.

The endearment makes my heart skip a beat. It’s been so long since he called me that, and I missed it more than I’d ever admit. “I do,” I whisper as I rise to my knees, a shy smile on my face as I drop the blankets and show him I’m naked underneath.

“*Fuck.*” He runs a hand through his hair, drawing my eyes to his abs.

“Come here,” I demand, my heart racing.

He takes a step forward, and then another, his eyes never leaving mine. I love the way his breathing accelerates, the way he hardened in the few seconds it took him to take in my body. I love the way he still wants me.

I grab his towel the second it’s within reach and yank it off impatiently, making him chuckle. “So needy,” he whispers as he kneels on my bed, his

hand wrapping into my hair. “Tell me, Celestial, have you been lying here thinking about me?”

I nod and let my hand roam over his chest, his tattoo even more beautiful in the moonlight. “I’m always thinking about you,” I admit, the words escaping my lips without conscious thought.

“Such a good wife,” he whispers, pulling me closer until my body is pressed against his. He tightens his grip on my hair and leans in until his mouth is hovering over mine. “I’ve been counting down the seconds, you know? It’s almost like your father and brother knew I was dying to come up here to fuck you, because every time I tried to get away, they reeled me back in. It was maddening.”

I chuckle and capture his bottom lip between mine before kissing him, my arms wrapping around his neck. “I’ll reward you for your patience,” I promise, deepening our kiss. He groans and runs his hands over my body like he can’t get enough, and it emboldens me, makes me feel like the most beautiful woman alive.

He kisses me like he’s desperate for me, like he’s been counting down the minutes just as I have been. Zane’s hand slips down my chest, his touch featherlight as his fingers trail between my legs, making me moan. He pulls back to look at me when he realizes how wet I am, his gaze sparkling with pure possessiveness. “So fucking beautiful,” he whispers as his fingers slip into me, drawing a needy whimper from my throat. “Look at you, baby. You’re a goddess, and it’s fucking surreal that you’re mine.”

He curls his fingers, and I bite down on my lip to suppress my moans. “Give it to me,” I whisper. “I’ve been waiting so long.”

He grins and pulls his hand away, making me gasp in displeasure. My neediness only serves to amuse him further, and he watches me as his hand wraps around his cock. “You want this?”

I nod, near-delirious. For at least an hour, I’ve been lying in bed thinking about what he’d do to me, and he knows it. “*Please.*”

“Tell me what you want, Celeste. Use your words properly.”

I bite down on my lip and squeeze my legs together, my breathing erratic. “I want you to fuck my face the way I said you could.”

He raises his fist to his mouth and bites down on it, his gaze burning with need. It’s been years since he looked at me with such intense desperation, his defenses completely down. Right now, right here, he looks at me like I truly am his goddess. He rises to his feet and stands right next

to my bed, his chest rising and falling rapidly, betraying his need. "Lie back," he orders, his voice low.

I do as he asks and position myself so my head is just off the bed and tilted backward, my entire body on display for him as my long hair brushes the floor. Zane inhales sharply when I open my mouth for him, his eyes meeting mine for a moment, before he steps forward and gently guides his cock into my mouth.

I take it eagerly, my tongue lapping at him the way I know he likes. He's so careful with me as he thrusts into me shallowly, and I moan, wanting more. I want my husband to lose control, to use my mouth the way he did in the past. I suck down on him harder, my movements silent pleas, and he takes my cue. Zane begins to move his hips the way I hoped he would, fucking my face like I told him to. "Such a good fucking girl," he groans, pushing into my throat. I swallow around him, loving the way he moans. "You're so good at this, Goddess. You still know exactly what I like, don't you?"

I swallow hard and use my tongue on him just the way he loves, my movements answering his questions. He groans, his pants driving me insane. "Touch yourself," he demands. "Let me see your hands trail over your body, slowly. Use the tips of your fingers, Celeste. Touch yourself the way you want me to touch you."

I follow his orders as he pushes deeper into my throat, and Zane's moans become a little more erratic when my fingers disappear between my legs. "Such a perfect pussy," he whispers. The idea he's watching me finger myself while he fucks my face drives me right to the edge. I just know that he can't resist the image I'm presenting him with, and it makes me feel so powerful to know I can still do this to him.

My hips begin to move as I bring myself closer to an orgasm, all of my senses overstimulated. "Don't come," he warns, and I whimper as I try my hardest to obey. "You're so fucking beautiful right now. You have no idea what you look like, do you? Fucking ethereal. You're my every dream come true, Celestial."

I can't take it when he says things like that, and he knows it. I moan as my pussy begins to throb, and he increases his pace, fucking my mouth harder, making me take nearly all of him. I moan around him as I give in, wave after wave of pure pleasure rocking my body as I come.

Zane tuts and pulls away, and I whimper at the loss. “This cock is only for good girls, Celeste. I told you not to come, didn’t I?”

I sit up on my knees. “I couldn’t resist,” I tell him, my gaze roaming over his body hungrily. Some days, it’s hard to believe I get to call Zane Windsor my husband. He hardly looks real standing here in the moonlight, his muscles taut and his cock rock hard for me. He looks at me like I’m his whole world, and the butterflies in my stomach go wild. “I need you,” I whisper, my heart racing.

“You have me,” he replies, as he positions himself so he’s seated with his back against my headboard. “Come here, wife.”

I’m breathing hard as I climb on top of him, my pussy throbbing. I don’t think I’ve ever wanted to be stretched and filled quite as badly as I do in this moment. My eyes are on his as I grab his cock and line him up. Zane throws me a warning look when I sink down on him and moan loudly, his hand clamping around my mouth. “Be quiet for me, Goddess,” he orders, his free hand wrapping into my hair.

I roll my hips, and he bites down on his lip, the torment in his gaze driving me wild. There’s something so infinitely sexy about the way he silences me with his hand as I ride him, his eyes never leaving mine. I don’t recall the last time I felt this *whole*, this *happy*, and I can’t get enough of this. The way he looks at me tells me he feels the same way.

Chapter Seventy-Six

CELESTE

I stare at the pile of clothes in our walk-in wardrobe, my mood souring further as I pick up a long black dress that just doesn't seem quite right. Each time Grandma Anne asks me to attend a Windsor event, I end up overthinking every single aspect, scared I'll mess up somehow.

I'm especially anxious this time, because the party we were asked to attend tonight is Lexington's. Out of all of Zane's siblings, Sierra and he are the ones that hate me most. Ares, Luca, and Dion don't seem to like me much, but every time I see them, they're polite — not as warm and welcoming as they used to be, but they're kind. Lex, on the other hand, seems convinced I'll bring harm to his family. Even Sierra has warmed to me more than he has. The worst part is I can't blame him for thinking it. All I can do is try to not make his impression of me worse.

"You can't wear that."

I whirl around and raise a hand to my chest in surprise at the sound of Raven's voice, dropping the black dress I was holding in the process. Raven sighs as she walks in wearing a stunning deep red gown with intricate beading and lace — her signature craftsmanship obvious at a glance.

She holds up a garment bag and hands it to me. "I dress every member of our family at all of our events. That includes you too, Celeste."

I take the bag from her with a heavy heart, regret rendering me speechless. There's so much I need to say to her, but the words are lodged

in my throat. “Thank you,” I whisper, my voice breaking.

She stares at me for a moment and sighs. “I see how hard you’re trying, Celeste... but if you truly want to make amends, just make him happy. Give Zane back the happiness you took away when you left.”

Hurt cuts through my chest, and I nod, my eyes filling with tears. “I want to.” The confession pains me for reasons she’ll never understand, but it’s true. The longer I’m married to Zane, the more I just want him to look at me without any trepidation, without that guard he always keeps up. I want the endless laughter, the playfulness, the intimacy. I fall asleep next to him every day, yet every morning I wake up missing him a little more, even when he’s right by my side.

Day by day, I’m doing exactly what Lily accuses me of in my nightmares — I’m forgetting her and moving on with Zane. Each time I’m reminded of that fact, it takes away every bit of happiness I’ve allowed myself to feel, every new memory we’ve created instantly becoming tainted.

Raven runs a hand through her long sleek hair, her expression betraying the conflict she feels. “He loves you, you know? I don’t think he ever stopped.”

I stare at her in disbelief, and she smiles at me, her gaze filled with so much hope. She turns to walk away, only to pause in the doorway and throw me a reassuring look before she walks out.

Love. We’re so far from it. I know what it’s like to be truly loved by Zane Windsor, to be the center of his universe. Nothing compares to it. Zane doesn’t love me, not the way he once did.

My heart aches as I carefully unwrap the dress Raven left me. It’s the same color as hers, but it’s a different model. I can just see tomorrow’s headlines already, showcasing her new collection on the Windsor girls. My nerves are drowned out by the weight of my regret as I get dressed, handling my beautiful gown with care. The very least I can do is represent Raven the way she wants me to — gracefully and respectfully.

I remember when Raven’s couture brand was nothing more than an idea, a pipe dream, and now I’m standing in front of the mirror in one of her priceless dresses. It feels bittersweet to be so proud of someone I don’t really know anymore, not the way I used to.

“Ready?”

I turn around, and Zane's eyes widen. "*Fuck*," he whispers, mussing up his hair as his gaze roams over my body. He takes a hesitant step toward me, and I meet him halfway, my heart racing as Raven's words echo through my mind. I know it isn't love, but when he looks at me like he wants me more than anything, it feels like it could be.

Zane takes a deep breath and gently trails over the curls that frame my face. "My wife is so fucking beautiful," he whispers, and I smile up at him when his eyes widen just a fraction, like he hadn't meant to let the thought slip.

He clears his throat and releases my hair. "We should go. There's a limousine waiting for us." His expression shutters closed, and loss washes over me. These glimpses he gives me are addictive, and with each day that passes, I find myself getting a little more greedy.

Zane sits opposite me on the way to the venue, and every few seconds, he glances at me, almost like he can't help himself. I smile, some of my unease settling. There's something so soothing about having his attention — it drives the butterflies in my stomach wild. "You look like a fucking goddess," he says eventually, sounding tormented.

"And you, husband dearest... you look like you want to fuck your goddess." I smile, unable to keep from teasing him. Moments like these just make my day, perhaps even my whole week.

Zane chuckles, and the sound makes my heart skip a beat. He shakes his head admonishingly and grabs my hand, entwining our fingers. "I will, Celestial. Remember that as every man in the room vies for your attention tonight. It's *my* bed you're ending up in. *You're mine*. When the night is over, I'm the one that'll take that dress off."

The possessiveness in his gaze brings a blush to my face, and my heart begins to beat faster. "Then you'd better remember who *you* belong to, Zane. As countless women ask you for a dance, remember, I'm the one who wears your ring."

He grins at me as the car comes to a stop, looking surprisingly pleased with my words. The door opens, and Zane steps out of the car. Cameras begin to flash, and I panic, nearly tripping in my high heels as I follow Zane out of the car. He chuckles and kneels on the red carpet, sending the reporters into a frenzy as he straightens out my dress before rising to his feet. "Mrs. Windsor," he murmurs, his voice barely audible over the reporters shouting questions at us. "I've always been yours."

My eyes widen, and a bashful smile lights up his face as he pulls me along, ignoring everything and everyone around us. Zane does this to me — makes me feel like I'm in a bubble he crafted just for us, one where nothing can touch us and giddiness drowns out everything else. More and more, I find myself wishing these moments could last, like they used to.

“By the way,” Zane tells me, his hand wrapping around my waist as he guides me through the ballroom. The crowd parts for him, and he doesn't even notice it. “Lex thinks we haven't realized he's been naming his cars so the initials spell WINDSOR backward. We're all betting on how long we can pretend not to know before one of us spills the beans, so don't breathe a word about it.” I bite back a smile, and he chuckles, shaking his head in amusement. “The model we're on right now is called Diana, and we barely managed to prevent him from naming it Deluca, because he thought it'd be funny for Luca to have a car called *The Luca*. The two of you have always come up with dumb ideas each time I left you unsupervised, so do not egg him on this time.”

I press my lips together to keep from laughing, and Zane pauses to look at me, amusement dancing in his eyes. “Deluca?” I repeat. “Is he serious?”

Zane nods, and I burst out laughing as he pulls me closer, his hand moving to my lower back. I wrap my arms around his neck, unable to stop laughing and loving the way he's grinning back at me. “Lex said it'd be funny to automate the system so he could order his Deluca car to do weird shit. He even gave us a demonstration, and I thought Luca was going to have a fucking heart attack when Lex said ‘*Deluca, who's a good boy?*’ and the AI system replied ‘*Deluca is a good boy, mighty Lex, my beloved creator!*’ The best part? It was in Luca's voice!”

Zane bursts out laughing at the memory, and we just stand there, our arms wrapped around each other, neither of us able to stop laughing. “*Mighty Lex?*” I repeat, trying my hardest not to burst into a fit of giggles all over again.

Zane chuckles, the look in his eyes changing as his gaze roams over my face. He sighs happily and cups my cheek with no regard for the packed room we're in. His thumb brushes over my bottom lip, and he stares at me with an intense longing that leaves me breathless. Do these moments between us feel as significant to him as they do to me?

He pushes his thumb against my lips, lust flickering through his eyes as his free hand wraps into my hair. A needy whimper escapes the back of my

throat when he pulls me closer, his lips finding mine.

I rise to my tiptoes to kiss him back, holding on to him tightly, desperately. Something that feels this right can't be wrong, can it? Zane pulls back a fraction, only to kiss me all over again, like he knows we should stop but just can't make himself. He captures my bottom lip between his teeth and grazes it teasingly before pulling away, his forehead brushing against me, and his breathing as ragged as mine. "Let's just go home," he whispers, his voice tortured. "Fuck it, Celestial. Lex releases a new car every year anyway."

I laugh and lean back in his arms to look at him. "We can't," I murmur, my hand slipping into his. He sighs reluctantly as I pull him along, and when I look over my shoulder, I find him staring at my ass longingly. A soft giggle bursts from my lips, and I tighten my grip on his hand. "Just a few hours. Then I'm yours."

He hums and squeezes my hand. "You're already mine, Mrs. Windsor. You always have been."

My heart warms, and he smiles at me as we navigate the crowd. "Let's go congratulate Lex," he says, and I nod, my cheer fading away when I spot him across the room. The way he looks at me makes me want to shrivel up inside myself. Lex's expression tells me I'm not worthy of his brother, and I never will be. He doesn't know the full story, but I suspect even if he did, he wouldn't feel any different.

I smile tightly and stand to the side as the two men hug, feeling entirely out of place. Some guy I vaguely recognize makes a beeline for Zane, clearly eager to capture his attention for a few moments, and Zane glances at me to make sure I'm okay. I nod and tip my head toward one of the servers carrying champagne to indicate I'll grab one.

"I'll get it," Lex says, beckoning one of the servers closer. I raise a brow, a tight smile on my face. He hands me a glass, and I take it gingerly.

"Congratulations on the new car," I tell him, trying my best to show him my sincerity. He frowns, irritation flashing across his face, and it just makes me even more nervous. "I saw you managed to develop the AI system you were dreaming about a few years ago, and it's honestly so impressive. It feels so real, and every time I ask anything at all, it gives the most natural response. I've tested it extensively and it hasn't failed to understand my questions once. I made it park my car for me the other day, and it worked flawlessly."

His gaze softens, and I press on, unable to stop rambling. My need to fill the silence between us is overwhelming, and though I wish I could just stop, I can't help it. "I also saw you managed to bring renewable energy to 70% of the countries you'd wanted to, and it's amazing how you've been able to bring both electricity and the internet to remote places that never had it. I always wondered if Sierra and you managed to make your mother's dream come true, you know? Windsor schools in places that needed it the most. I mean... if you've put in the infrastructure, she's probably already building the schools, right? Of course she is."

Lex raises a brow and knocks his champagne back. "How do you know about that?" he asks, his tone only slightly friendlier. "We don't advertise those charity efforts."

I smile nervously and clench the stem of my glass in an effort to stop trembling. "How could I not? I developed a lot of those plans with you and still wanted to turn them into a reality. By the time I had the funds to start implementing our ideas, I found that it'd already happened. It couldn't have been anyone but you." I look away and inhale deeply. "Besides, despite everything, I still consider you family. Just like I always know what Archer is up to, I always kept an eye on you too."

Lex stares at me for a moment, his expression disarmed. "How long left?" he asks eventually, his tone firm and so unlike the playful tone he uses with his siblings — the one I'd gotten used to and taken for granted.

I look away in an attempt to hide the pain his words cause, a fake smile on my face. "Two years and one month," I answer, knowing exactly what he's asking about.

"I need you to stay gone this time," he says. "I saw the two of you just now, and I'll be damned if I let you hurt him again."

Anger mixes with my heartache, and I glare at him. "Zane isn't the only one who got hurt," I snap. "Did you ever think about what he must've done for me to retaliate the way I did? You always said I was like a sister to you, but when it comes down to it, those were just empty words, weren't they? You'd never treat Sierra this way if she suffered through what I did."

He smiles humorlessly. "Don't compare yourself to Sierra," he tells me, his voice hard. "Consider this a warning, Celeste. Hurt him again, and I'll personally make you face the consequences."

I take a step back, sharp pain tearing through my broken heart. "I won't," I tell him, my tone conveying my torment. "I can't hurt your

brother even if I wanted to. Despite what you think you saw, he wants me gone as much as you do. What you're seeing is him making the best of a bad situation, and don't worry, Lex. He never lets me forget it."

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Chapter Seventy-Seven

CELESTE

“Can you handle the 3 p.m. acquisition meeting for me?” Zane asks as he rises from behind his desk, looking stressed out. “I need to leave.”

Searing disappointment washes over me. “Oh. I... I mean, yes, I can, but I just thought... I thought it would be nice to go home together after the meeting wraps up?”

We’ve been going to work and coming home together most days for a couple of weeks now, and I’d hoped we’d do that today too. “Sorry,” Zane says, running a hand through his hair. “I’m busy.”

I frown and push aside the hurt his words cause. “With what?” My tone is sharper than I’d intended it to be, and he raises a brow as he grabs his jacket from the back of his chair, his expression shuttering closed. I watch him walk away without answering my question and I stare after him, something dark unfurling deep in my chest when the door closes behind him.

Countless scenarios run through my mind, each more painful than the last, and I sigh as I sink back into my chair. I’m tired of feeling so insecure around my husband, of wondering if he’s rushing away to see someone else. Things may have become more civil between us, and the sex definitely is as good as it used to be, but there’s still this distance between us that feels insurmountable. There are parts of himself he won’t show me, and I suppose the reverse is true too.

I'm not even sure what I'd call us. We're not friends, and we're definitely not a real couple. I suppose we're just business acquaintances who sleep together, and today, more than any other day, I wish that wasn't the case. I miss him, the real him, the version of him that used to be mine. I want the man who never would've forgotten what day it is today.

It's all I can think about as I get through the rest of the day, eager to just get home so I can crawl into bed with a book that'll let me forget about everything I can't have, everything I shouldn't even want.

My heart is heavy as I park in front of the house, on the brink of tears, without truly being able to pinpoint why. Some days, the grief just hits me harder, and my loneliness feels a little heavier. Missing someone who's gone is tough, but missing someone who's right by your side chips away at your soul like nothing else I've ever experienced. I miss the way we'd share small details about our days, the way we'd joke around, and the way he used to look at me. I miss the unwavering trust between us and how excited we were about our future. I miss being his person and having all of him in return.

I take a deep breath and get out of the car, desperate for a shower and our bed, where I can cling to his pillow and pretend for a few moments until the illusion shatters. Remorse threatens to overwhelm me when I press my thumb to the scanner at the front door, my memories haunting me. Once upon a time, I stood right here, seconds away from betraying the man I loved more than anything. If I could go back in time, would I make the same choice? I'm not sure anymore.

The door swings open, and I frown when I spot rose petals on the floor, creating a trail for me to follow. My heart begins to pound wildly as I try to comprehend what might be going on. Hope blooms in my chest as I take a hesitant step forward in the shoes Zane once gave me, the diamonds sparkling in the candlelight that illuminates my path.

My heart is in my throat when I reach the end of the trail and find my husband standing in front of the hallway that leads to his observatory, a bouquet of his mother's roses in his hands. "Happy birthday, Celeste," he says, the sweetest smile on his face as he hands me the flowers.

I choke back a sob, but tears spill from my eyes nonetheless. "I thought you f-forgot."

He cups my cheek and swipes away my tears, his gaze filled with tenderness. "There isn't a single thing about you I could ever forget, no

matter how hard I try, no matter how much it hurts.”

I reach for him and throw myself against his chest, earning myself a soft chuckle as his arm wraps around me. “I hope you’re hungry, baby,” he murmurs. “I cooked you dinner.” He kisses the top of my head, and I swallow down another sob. “It isn’t much, but I thought it might be nice to have dinner in the observatory?”

I lean back to look at him in disbelief. “I thought you said it was off-limits to me.” Something flashes in his eyes, and I regret the words immediately. I wish I hadn’t reminded him of it.

“Not anymore,” he whispers. My heart skips a beat when he throws me a shaky smile, his hand slipping into mine. Zane pulls me through the hallway, nostalgia hitting me in waves as we enter the observatory.

This is where he kissed me for the first time, where he took my virginity, and where we dreamed of our future together. When I think of our best memories, I inadvertently think of this place. It’s where we had most of our dates, where we fell in love.

My heart feels heavy as I take in all the changes. So many of the flowers are gone, and new ones have taken their place. I stumble when an unwanted thought rushes to the forefront of my mind — all of the flowers he ripped out were *lily* varieties, and my heart sinks at the thought of him not being able to see them without thinking of *her*.

“What’s wrong?” Zane asks.

I look up at him and force a smile, unwilling to ruin this moment, yet unable to hide the way my mood just dropped. Guilt begins to swirl deep in my chest, and I push it down, desperate to just exist in this moment with Zane. “Nothing,” I tell him, tightening my grip on his hand.

Zane studies me curiously but lets it go, his grip becoming just a little clammier as we approach one of the gardens. A hint of disappointment washes over me when I realize it isn’t the rose garden he took me to, but I push the feeling aside immediately. He always warned me that the rose garden was for his wife, and in his eyes... that isn’t me. Not truly.

“Here we are,” Zane murmurs, and my lips part in surprise as I look around, noting the thousands of flowers with fairy lights entwined between them, a dining table in the center.

I bite down on my lip as he reaches for me and brushes away tears I hadn’t even realized had started to fall again. He shakes his head so tenderly as I look into his eyes, and when he kisses my forehead, I just know. No one

will ever compare to him. Regret hits me harder than it ever has before, and my heart twists painfully at the thought of everything that could've been ours, everything he'll someday give to someone else.

Zane leads me to my seat and pulls it out for me, his patience endless tonight. "I cooked you the lamb ragout you used to love," he tells me as servers bring in trays. "I wasn't sure if you still like it, but I—"

"I do," I reassure him instantly, my heart overflowing with a mixture of gratitude and pure joy — the unfiltered kind, the kind you feel when you're in the middle of a moment you just know you'll remember forever.

Zane sits down opposite me, and I can't tear my eyes off him. It isn't the way he's lost his suit jacket and waistcoat, nor is it the way he rolled up his shirt sleeves. It's the way he looks at me, like he finds me mesmerizing.

My husband's eyes darken when I sigh happily, a soft moan on my lips as I take a bite of a dish I've missed more than he could possibly understand. "Did you know I was always jealous of this stupid pasta, because each time you have it, you wrap your lips around your fork the way you wrap them around my cock? I should be the only one that can make you sound like *that*."

I laugh, startled by his confession. "Is that why you refused to make it for me half the time?"

He shrugs and nods, which only makes me laugh harder. "Zane, you can't be jealous of.. of... *food*... that *you* made." I take another bite and try my hardest not to giggle in response to his scowl. "That doesn't even make sense. Doesn't that just mean you're still the one that's making me moan?"

He crosses his arms, the cutest expression on his face. "I don't care. I don't like it."

"Okay, babe. I'll just eat it quietly next time. I'll only ever moan like that for you — that's a vow."

His smile melts away, and I'm not sure why. Is it because I accidentally let an old endearment slip out, or is it the vow I made? "Don't ever break this one," he whispers, almost like he isn't sure he wanted me to hear it.

"I won't," I promise. This promise won't be hard to keep — there's never been anyone but him. There never will be.

The way he glances at me over dinner tugs at my heartstrings, makes me long for more, makes me think he might want it too. Would Lily forgive me if I forgave him? She would understand how I feel more than anyone. I still remember how she worried she was being selfish when she wanted him

and the happiness he brought her, and now I find myself in the same position. I want him — despite everything.

Zane leans back in his seat as our staff replace our plates before bringing in a cake that seems to be mostly made of fresh fruit, with one single candle on top. They place it in front of me, and Zane leans in, his expression conflicted as he rests his elbow on the table, his fist underneath his jaw. The look in his eyes holds me captive, and I'd give the world to know what he's feeling right now. "Make a wish, Celestial."

"What if I tell you you're the only one who can make my wish come true?" My voice is soft, vulnerable, and I struggle to hold his gaze as the question hovers in the air between us.

"Then tell me your wish, and I'll fulfill it."

I stare at my husband, my breathing shallow. "I want you back."

Zane's eyes widen, and for a few moments, he looks entirely disarmed. My heart beats wildly as I wait for his answer, the air between us charged in a way it never has been before.

When he runs a hand through his hair and looks away, I've got my answer. I slip out of my seat before he can reject me, pushing aside my vulnerability in favor of bravery. Zane's gaze roams over me as I push against his chair and make space for myself. He sighs softly when my hands wrap over his shoulder, his conflict evident as I slip onto his lap, straddling him.

My heart is racing as I cup his face and force him to look at me, my breathing ragged. "I want you back," I repeat, my voice clear and confident. "I want *us* back."

Zane grabs my waist, his expression hardening, and I'm certain he's about to push me away, but then he tightens his grip on me, his eyes shuttering closed as he drops his forehead to my shoulder. "That's not possible, Celeste," he whispers, his voice filled with regret.

I thread my hand through his hair, my touch gentle. "Look at me," I plead. Zane pulls back, giving in to my request, his gaze conveying that he wishes he could deny me. I've never seen him look so tormented, and all it does is fuel my hope. "I love you, Zane. Despite everything, after all we've been through, I love you. I've fought it, hated myself for it, but I can't change it. I love you, and I know I will until I take my last breath." I place my palm over his heart, the way I always used to. "Can't we just start over?"

I don't want to live in the past anymore, Zane. I want the future we always thought we'd have."

He searches my face, his breathing uneven. His expression tells me he wants this too. Zane might not be the man I used to know, but I still know him better than he thinks I do. "What about Lily?" he whispers, almost like he doesn't dare say her name.

Pure agony courses through me, settling in my chest. My eyes fall closed, and I suck in a breath, gathering my courage. She'd never forgive the words I'm about to say, but I can't contain them any longer. "She's gone, Zane, but we're still here, and somehow, despite everything standing between us, we found our way back to each other. That's gotta count for something, right? It's time I put her to rest. The Lily I used to know... I think she'd want me to be happy, and the truth is... without you, I can't be. I love you, Zane, enough to forgive you."

I'm meant to attend her memorial ceremony next week, and I plan to ask for her forgiveness then, but I also plan to say my final goodbyes. If I keep holding on to her the way I have been, it'll continue to slowly kill me, and I just don't believe she'd want that for me. She might not want to see me with Zane, but I think she'd understand. I hope she'd want me to be happy, and it's becoming clear that I can't be, not without him.

Zane tenses and locks his jaw, frustration marring his features. "We didn't find our way back to each other, Celeste," he says, his tone harsh. "We were forced together. The truth is, had I been given a choice, I'd never have chosen you. You say you forgive me? You can't forgive me for something I didn't do." He lets go of me, his arms falling to his side. "I'm tired, Celeste. Tired of the blame, the broken trust. I'm tired of loving you more than you ever loved me."

Chapter Seventy-Eight

CELESTE

“I’m glad you could make it,” Lily’s father says as I enter the church. Fresh grief threatens to overwhelm me as I look around, and I draw a steadying breath. This is where we held her funeral too, and all of a sudden, it feels like I’m back in the past, in those moments when we were told her body had been found.

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world, Raymond,” I murmur, forcing a smile, guilt settling in my chest. The truth is I nearly hadn’t made it at all, and if not for the remorse following the mere thought of wanting to move on, I wouldn’t be here. It’s sickening how badly I want to forget, when I once promised myself I never would.

Raymond nods at me, his own expression haunted. “I didn’t think you’d come, not now you’re married to Zane Windsor.”

My entire body goes rigid, and my eyes snap to his. Pure dread settles in the pit of my stomach, blending with something akin to bitterness. “Did you know?” I ask, my tone sharper than I’d intended. “About them?”

I never told him what Lily told me, didn’t have it in me to admit I’d been part of the reason he lost his daughter. It was pure selfishness — I couldn’t handle the shame, the weight of my sins. Couldn’t look him in the eye and tell him I was the reason she chose to jump when, for years, I’d been the reason she didn’t. That night, every attempt at reassurance only drove her closer to the edge, fueling her guilt.

Raymond searches my face, his expression pained. “You’re still okay to speak, aren’t you? You and I are the people who loved her the most. You’re one of the few people who remember her the way I wanted her to be remembered, as the beautiful soul she was, however broken she might have been at times.”

His reluctance to answer my question is an answer in itself, and I lower my gaze. “Of course,” I tell him, my voice breaking. “I’d be honored.”

He nods and gestures toward the front of the church, leading me toward it. With every step I take, my heartache intensifies. I meant what I said when I told Zane I’d forgive him, but standing here, with a beautiful photo of Lily in the same church we said our goodbyes in... it just makes me feel like I’m betraying her by standing here as Celeste Windsor. This is why she chose to part with me — because she couldn’t bear to watch me marry Zane, and in the end, that’s exactly what I did.

The worst part is I don’t regret it. Not anymore. Even as I stand in front of a crowd of familiar faces with Lily’s photo by my side, I can’t find it in me to feel bad for trying to choose happiness after years of pure devastation. Would she find me selfish? Would she condemn me for my choices? I’d be lying if I said I’m not ashamed of my own weakness, of forgiving Zane for something I’ve always found unforgivable. I guess she did know how our story would go — she’d seen me forgive him for years of pain once before, and here I am, doing it again. When she told me she’d never seen me love anyone the way I loved Zane, she was right.

I take a deep breath before addressing those who have gathered to honor her memory, feeling entirely unqualified to stand here. Out of everyone here, I’m the one who has the least right to speak of her like I don’t betray her with every heartbeat.

“Liliana was my best friend, and the closest thing to a sister I had growing up,” I say, my voice trembling. “Not a day goes by without me thinking of her. She wasn’t the kind of person you forget easily. When Lily walked into a room, she’d light it up with her smile within seconds, and she’d make you feel so at ease, almost instantly. That was one of her qualities I always loved most, the way she cared so deeply about everyone around her. She was always the one that made sure everyone felt included, and not a day went by without her reminding me that I mattered.”

I stare at the cue cards in my hands, my vision swimming with tears. “When the pain becomes too heavy to carry, I think of our best memories,

and it always helps lessen the grief just a little. It reminds me of the impact she had on my life, of the legacy she left behind.” I watch as several people dab away tears, some people we went to high school with, some Lily met at the various charities she volunteered at. “My favorite memory is one from university. We both studied in London, and while we were in England, she’d often tempt me into joining one of her many impulsive road trips. On one of those trips, we found ourselves in a city called Liverpool.”

I laugh through my tears, my heart warming. “We spent the entire weekend trying to decipher what people were saying — it definitely was English, but neither of us could understand a word, and for weeks after, she’d imitate the accent, making me laugh each and every time. For years after, she’d say *milk* the way they do there, and I’d giggle in response. That’s what she did — she inspired joy in everyone around her.”

Tears run down my face, and I draw a shaky breath as I put away the speech I’d prepared, feeling like a fraud. I’d planned to do what I did for Lily when she missed her mom, and talk about my favorite memories with her. I’d wanted to share parts of her that only I knew about, but I don’t have it in me today. “In more ways than one, Lily saved me,” I tell the crowd instead, my voice breaking. “I just wish I could’ve saved her in return.”

I step back and shake my head, unable to keep standing here like I have any right to be here, to talk of our memories together like I don’t desecrate the memory of her every single day. I bite down on my lip and shake my head. “I’m sorry,” I murmur. “I can’t do this.”

I stumble back and hesitate for a beat, before walking away, knowing Lily wouldn’t want me to speak when I did exactly what she feared I would. I keep my eyes on the church’s doors as I take one step after the other, needing to get away.

“Celeste!”

I turn back to find Lily’s father rushing after me, and I pause right next to my car, even though I struggle to face him.

Raymond reaches for me, his hands trembling as he wipes away my tears. “She loved you more than anyone else, Celeste. She wouldn’t want to see you this way.”

My vision is blurry as I glance up at him, wishing I could latch onto the hope his words instill in me, but I know they’re merely meant as consolation, not an ounce of truth to them. I force a smile, even as more tears run down my face, my lungs burning.

“Sweetheart,” he says, his tone hesitant. “I think there’s someone you should meet.”

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Chapter Seventy-Nine

CELESTE

I stare up at the commercial building Raymond asked me to meet him at, my body heavy with grief. It isn't just the memorial, and the guilt I'm feeling toward Lily. It's Zane too. I've barely seen him since he walked away from my birthday dinner. I'd have thought forgiving him would be a step forward, but it seems like we've gone back to the way we were when we first got married. Except, perhaps, a little worse. Back then, he at least gave me his attention in the form of hatred. Now he just avoids me entirely. When we're in the same space, he acts overly cordial, keeping as much distance between us as possible. It feels like I lost him all over again, and I can't understand why.

It hurts, but it infuriates me too. It took all of me to forgive him, to set my pride and morals aside to ask him for another chance, only for him to reject me so wholly. I've never felt so scorned, so heartbroken. Back when I lost Lily, the betrayal had been numbed somewhat by the force of my grief, and I'd been able to hide behind my anger and my plans for revenge. This time there's nothing but heartache and questions he won't answer.

"Celeste," Raymond says, his expression weary. He looks down when he reaches me, his body language conveying defeat.

"Hi," I say, forcing some cheer into my voice. "I had a look at the building, but there are countless offices in there. Where are we going?"

I haven't even had the energy to wonder who it is Raymond wanted me to meet. There's so much on my mind already there's barely any space for more. I almost didn't show up today, desperate to leave the past behind, only for guilt to surge through me when I realized how incredibly selfish I've become.

"You'll see," he says, leading me into the building. "This... it's hard for me, Celeste. I hope you understand I just wanted there to be one person in this world who only ever saw the best parts of her."

I frown as I follow him into the elevator, my anguish increasing when I notice how hard his hands are shaking. The numbers on the screen move up, and the closer we get to our floor, the more anxious Raymond seems to get. His breathing becomes more shallow, and he doesn't seem to know where to look. It makes me nervous in a frantic, fearful kind of way.

He hesitates when the doors open, his gaze traveling over my face as he takes a deep breath and nods, seemingly more to himself than to me. His steps are slow as we walk into what appears to be a clinic of some sort, almost like he wants to delay the inevitable.

Confusion washes over me as we're greeted by a middle-aged woman in a suit, her shoulder-length blond hair perfectly straight. "You must be Celeste," she says, smiling as she gestures toward her office. "Please, come in. I'm Dr. Black."

I glance at Raymond, whose expression is unreadable as he joins me in Dr. Black's office. "Celeste," he says, his voice soft. "Dr. Black was Lily's psychiatrist. I've given her my consent to share all of Lily's medical data with you. There's a lot you didn't know about Lily, and she never wanted you to find out, but I can't in good conscience keep this hidden from you."

I take a seat opposite Dr. Black's desk, my mind reeling. "Lily mentioned having a psychiatrist when she was younger, because she found it so hard to deal with her mother's death. I know about that."

Raymond's expression falls, and he sits down next to me, remorse flashing through his gaze. "It's not that simple," he says, his tone reluctant. Raymond nods at Dr. Black, the two of them exchanging looks of understanding.

"Celeste," Dr. Black says, her tone sharp. "Lily suffered from borderline personality disorder." My eyes widen in shock, and Dr. Black smiles tightly, her expression matter-of-fact, like she didn't just tell me something that can't possibly be true. "It developed after she lost her mother, but most of

the time, it was manageable. She often had intense emotions, and when she was tired or overworked, she suffered from paranoia and dissociation. Lily wasn't able to manage her emotions very well and lacked the ability to reassure herself like you and I can. Sometimes, we're able to say to ourselves that we're having a bad day and shake it off, but she couldn't. It often led to impulsiveness, anxiety, and depression that she tried to keep hidden from you, because she feared losing you."

She grabs a folder and opens it, like she needs to refresh her mind, like Lily was merely one patient out of many. I grit my teeth to keep from snapping at her, irrational anger overtaking me. Is this supposed to be an attempt to explain why she took her own life? Is this Raymond's way of telling me it wasn't my fault, when he can't possibly understand what really happened?

"Lily struggled to form emotional connections after the fear of abandonment she developed due to the loss of her mother, but you were one of very few exceptions. She was never particularly interested in the hospitality industry, but she decided to become an interior designer because you'd opted to become a hotelier. That's not uncommon for those with BPD. They often don't have strong feelings about their goals, values, or beliefs, and instead take cues from their environment. In Lily's case, that was you."

I suck in a breath when she pushes an open folder toward me, showing me Lily's diagnosis. Seeing it doesn't make it any easier to believe it. "I'd have known," I tell her, my voice weak. "If this was true, I'd have known. Lily loved drawing, and she... she started to draw interiors when we were still in high school."

Raymond looks at me and shakes his head. "I didn't know the extent of it either. When she came of age, I was no longer able to access her medical records, and she led me to believe she'd gotten better. I didn't find out until weeks after she passed, and by then, you'd already left town."

Dr. Black throws me a sympathetic smile that makes me feel even worse. Denial washes over me, and I shake my head, unwilling to believe there could be something so significant that Lily kept from me.

"When Lily started her first real job, her workload was heavier than she was used to, and it heightened her unstable emotional state, eventually resulting in erotomania and delusions of reference on top of her BPD."

My breathing becomes shallow as panic begins to tug at me, threatening to overwhelm me. “W-What does that mean?” I ask. “Delusions? What delusions?”

The doctor flicks through the documents in the folder and pushes a transcript toward me. “Lily believed she was in a relationship with her boss, Zane Windsor.”

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Chapter Eighty

CELESTE

My entire body is shaking as I walk into Lily's cabin, noting how clean it is, even though everything seems to be in the same place she left it. I've been in a daze ever since I left the doctor's office, my mind unable to comprehend what Dr. Black told me.

"She'd often wear black or navy, because it allowed her to believe they were wearing matching couple outfits, and my gentle attempts to dissuade her were unsuccessful. As time passed, she began to believe that the flowers he brought for his office were for her, and right before they were thrown away, she'd take them with her, completely ignoring every cue that didn't support her delusions. Each time they went for lunch as a team, her mind only registered him, and she believed each instance was a date. Within a matter of months, Lily convinced herself they were in a relationship, and each time I tried to convince her otherwise, she became increasingly agitated, going as far as accusing me of trying to break them up. Her behavior wasn't as volatile as other patients I've treated, and she didn't seem to pose a threat to herself or to him, so I continued to counsel her in an attempt to manage her condition. Some part of her must have been aware of her delusions, because she never took it far enough to allow the illusion to shatter. It made me believe there was hope."

I grab Lily's diary and flick through it, re-reading her entries, unable to make sense of anything. I draw a shaky breath, fresh tears gathering in my

eyes as I trace over her handwriting, unsure what to believe. Zane used to bring fresh flowers to his office twice a week, because it reminded him of his mother, and having her flowers nearby made him feel like she was there with him.

His mom used to bring his dad flowers that she grew for him, each a hidden message. It's a tradition he always loved, and one he hoped to continue with his own wife. It's why it hurt so much to read about them — because I thought he'd shared that tradition with Lily. I distinctly remember her saying he'd given her roses, which he expressly told me he reserved for his wife.

I search through Lily's diary to find the date, a sob tearing through my throat when I recognize it, now I'm looking at it with fresh eyes. The day she claimed to have received a bouquet of roses from Zane was the same day as his mother's birthday. They were never for Lily, were they?

My lungs begin to burn as I re-read the same letters that convinced me he cheated on me, Dr. Black's reports in hand. I remember the way Zane let me pour through video footage of all his hotels, showing me each company trip they went on. I'd noticed the flowers in his office then, but I hadn't made the connection. I'd been too focused on finding something that simply wasn't there.

"Lily," I whisper. "What have I done? What have we both done?"

I clutch her diary to my chest and sink to the floor, just like I did when I read her suicide letter. Hot tears stream down my face, and I try my hardest to breathe through the pain. Every time Zane went on a business trip, we'd talk on the phone until late at night, and I'd dismissed that, convinced myself he must've called me after he'd been with Lily — it's something I despised him for, something that tore me apart for years. Thinking back now, it suddenly seems unlikely he could've been with Lily, when it seemed irrefutable in the past.

I bury my face against my knees and cry for everything we lost, all the pain Lily and I both caused, and for the first time in years, I don't know what to do with all of my anger. Zane doesn't deserve it, but neither does Lily, not considering how sick she was. I never even realized it, wasn't there to support her when she needed me.

My mind drifts to the way he looked at me when I told him I'd forgiven him for what he'd done to me. He's seemed so angry, so hurt, and it finally makes sense. When he denied Lily's allegations, he wasn't lying. I'd been

so lost in my grief, and I'd felt so betrayed I wasn't listening to reason. In light of Lily's letters and everything she told me, nothing he said held any weight, but it should have. When I think of the way he begged me to believe him, what's left of my heart just shatters.

Is this what Lily wanted? When she stood on that bridge, she firmly believed they'd dated, and the pain I saw in her eyes was real. But did a small part of her know that saying what she did would tear us apart?

Doubt begins to creep in, and I can't help but wonder if she'd wanted to break us up. Everything she left me indicates that she'd wanted me to know what she'd considered the truth, but was Dr. Black right, and had some part of her known that none of it was real?

I search through her diary, remembering that at some point, she'd written something about how she wanted to be the only one he could think of, and that she didn't like the thoughts she was having. Was that what it was all about? It seems like the impulsiveness and depression that are characteristics of her disorder led her to that bridge, but was she in part motivated by a desire to ensure Zane would never stop thinking of her? Did she know that doing what she did would tear us apart forever? Had that been her hope?

My stomach turns as dozens of scenarios cross my mind, each worse than the last. Raymond said he'd wanted there to be one person who only ever saw the best parts of her, but what did the worst parts of her look like? Could Lily have harbored ill intentions toward me, even if only because of her illness?

I think of the pain in Zane's eyes when he told me he was tired of loving me more than I ever loved him, and newfound fear grips me. I focused all my pain on avenging both Lily and myself, destroying what I thought Zane loved most — his company. If not for his grandmother, he'd never have survived the damage I did. What he did to Harrison Developments in return was nothing in comparison.

I begin to feel sick as I think of everything I did to him, to us, and his expression on my birthday finally begins to make sense. He isn't the one that needs to be forgiven—I am.

Chapter Eighty-One

ZANE

My body is taut with nerves as I pace in the hallway, the sound of the ticking clock slowly driving me mad. I'd been avoiding Celeste after her birthday, unsure what to think of her words and unable to push aside that uncontrollable feeling of injustice when she told me she forgave me for something I never even did, but tonight she's the one that's avoiding me.

I hesitate a beat before calling our head of security, Silas Sinclair. I've kept from invading her privacy as best as I can for as long as we've been married, intent on keeping our private lives as separate as possible — but honestly, part of it was just fear of what I might find. I could never quite get her engagement to Clifton out of my mind, and I'd worried I'd one day end up looking for her, only to find out she was with him. My stomach turns at the thought of it, and I nearly end the call moments before Silas picks up.

"Zane?" he says, his tone concerned. "What's wrong?"

I hesitate a beat, unsure of what I'm even doing. "My wife," I murmur. "Do you know where she is?"

I'm met with the sound of typing, followed by a sigh. "Zane," Silas says, his tone conveying his irritation. "According to the tracking devices I put in her phone and her car, she's a mere few steps away from your house."

The front door opens moments later, and I end the call, pure worry overtaking my senses as I take in her red eyes and her shaking body. She

freezes mid-step, and the moment her eyes meet mine, she bursts into tears, devastation marring her beautiful face.

“Zane.”

I bridge the distance between us and pull her into my arms just as a sob tears through her throat. “What happened?” I ask as she clutches at my shirt, her touch desperate. “Celestial, you’re worrying me. Where were you?”

I bury my hand in her hair and force her to look at me, but she won’t face me, keeping her gaze downcast as she balls my shirt in her hands. Celeste chokes on a sob, her grief uncontrollable, and I can’t make sense of what’s going on. If anyone had been hurt, Silas would’ve already informed me. Ever since Celeste betrayed me, we put into place countless protocols that would’ve been implemented if anything was seriously wrong with any of our businesses or anyone in our family. When we got married, I added Celeste’s family to that list too, so what could’ve possibly caused her distress?

“Baby, look at me,” I whisper, cupping her face.

Her eyes meet mine for a split-second before she averts her gaze again, her sobs becoming erratic. There’s nothing I can do as I watch my wife fall apart in my arms, and my attempts to hold her together are futile. I can’t fix the problem if I don’t know what it is, and I’ve never seen Celeste like this.

She gasps when I bend down and lift her into my arms, and she begins to cry even harder as I carry her to our bedroom. My wife buries her face against my neck and holds on to me with all her might, like she’s scared to ever let go. What could’ve possibly happened to her? Is this because of Lily’s memorial a few days ago? In the days since her birthday, things were tense between us at work, but nothing happened to cause this level of grief, so it can’t be me she’s crying over.

I sit down on our bed with her in my lap, and she rests her head against my shoulder, her breathing ragged. “Celestial, will you tell me what’s making you so sad? If it’s within my power, I’ll fix it. Fuck, there’s nothing I won’t do if it’ll make you stop crying. You’re breaking my heart, Celeste.”

She cups my face and tries her hardest to steady her breathing, but it remains choppy despite her best attempts. “Tell me something,” she asks, her voice breaking. “Have you ever lied to me?”

My eyes widen at the loaded question, and I search her face, though I’m uncertain what for. “Once. When we were twelve, I told you that you

looked stupid with your braces, even though you were absolutely stunning even then.”

Her thumb brushes over my lip, and she tried her hardest to bite back a sob, her grief seemingly bottomless. “And since then?”

I stare at her, trying my best to decipher the look in her eyes. It’s a quiet confidence, and I haven’t seen her look at me that way in years. “Never, Celeste. I haven’t lied to you once since you returned from college, and the lies I did tell you when we were kids were all attempts to tease you. I have never, and will never, knowingly deceive you.”

She nods, and a weight I hadn’t realized I was still carrying falls from my shoulders. “Zane,” she whispers. “I am so sorry.”

My wife draws a shaky breath, uncertainty crossing her face. I watch her as she gathers her courage, the way she scrunches her brows betraying her nerves. I’m enraptured as she bites down on her lip and looks to her right, taking a moment to collect herself. This is how she always looked when there was something she needed to tell me, and she didn’t know how.

“I’ll bring this up one more time and never again, Zane, I promise. You... you never cheated on me, did you?”

My entire body goes rigid, and for a moment, I’m tempted to lift her off my lap, the need for space suddenly rushing through me. Celeste grabs my shirt, her gaze pleading, and fuck, I’m still so fucking weak when it comes to her. “There are only so many times I can say it,” I tell her, weary to the bone. “It’s always been you, Celeste.”

She begins to cry all over again as she tells me about her visit to the doctor’s office and the documents she read. I’m oddly detached as she reminds me of Lily’s diary, and the words she spoke before her death. Celeste and I argued about Lily’s allegations and her diary for weeks, right until she betrayed me. It had gotten to a stage where my grandmother was getting the paperwork done to formally disown me, and I still fought for us when she wouldn’t even give me the benefit of the doubt.

I stare at my wife as she tells me repeatedly that she’s sorry, but the words do nothing for me. They don’t soothe my aching heart, nor do they grant me the relief I thought I’d feel. I always knew something must’ve been wrong with Lily for her to have made up such insane lies, but Celeste never believed me, wouldn’t even consider the idea.

“Celeste,” I murmur, my voice soft despite my firm tone. “I did everything I possibly could to prove my innocence to you, but you weren’t

even remotely willing to listen. You destroyed everything we fought so hard to build, and you did it with your own two hands. You looked me in the eye and smiled as you weaponized every single project I'd helped you with, turning them into accusations of corporate espionage that were nearly irrefutable. I won't lie to you and say I wouldn't have let my pain guide me the way you did had our roles been reversed, but I'd never have destroyed you like that. I would never have tried to put you behind bars for *years*."

I push against her gently, unable to treat her roughly even now. "The way I see it, you took the easy way out. It was becoming clear our relationship was going to cost us everything, and you jumped on the excuse Lily gave you. I'd have done anything for you. I'd have given up everything, but you weren't willing to do the same."

I rise to my feet, and she grabs my hand, holding on to me desperately. "Zane," she pleads. "That isn't true. You know that's not true. You can't possibly believe that. Zane, *I love you*."

I turn back to face her, my heart heavy. "Isn't it true? Just a week ago, you said you want me back, now it's easier to be with me. All of a sudden, you were able to forgive me for my supposed sins, when for years, you did all you could to make me pay for them. Isn't that awfully convenient, Celeste? If we divorce in two years, it'll greatly complicate our company structure, and you'll lose access to the Windsor wealth and network. Divorcing me doesn't benefit you, but staying here, pretending you forgive me, that does."

She looks stricken, and for a split-second, I'm tempted to believe her, just like I did back then. I fell for that innocent look in her eyes, for her smiles. "I don't have any faith in us, Celeste. Not anymore. I don't believe you love me — I'm not sure you ever really did."

Chapter Eighty-Two

CELESTE

My gaze moves from the plant I'm holding to Zane's closed home office door, my heart thudding wildly as I battle my indecision. For two weeks now, he's come home only to walk straight into his office, shutting me out completely. It's clear he doesn't know what to make of my apologies, and I'm torn between giving him space and wanting to show him my sincerity. I keep thinking about the way he looked at me when he told me he doesn't believe I love him, and that I only want to be with him now because it's easier. How do I convince him otherwise? How do I earn his forgiveness after everything I've put him through? He was right to say I destroyed us with my own two hands, and I don't know how to make things right. I've never felt such debilitating regret, and there's no one to direct my anger and helplessness at — no one but myself.

I take a deep steadying breath before pushing the door open, and he looks up, his expression shuttering closed when he notices the plant I'm holding. I pause and just take him in for a moment, deep longing settling in my chest. I've barely seen him in days — every time we're in the same room, he finds a reason to leave. Even at night, he seems to wait until he thinks I'm asleep before joining me in bed, like he did in the first few weeks of our marriage.

More than once, I've wanted to turn around and force him to face me, but I haven't had the heart to. The last thing I want to do is make him even

more uncomfortable by cornering him late at night in our bed. I'm not after more conflict, and I won't earn his favor by getting on his nerves.

When he can't get out of being in the same space as me at the office, he concentrates solely on his own work, utilizing Mike to liaise between us when need be. The way he's been avoiding me makes it so obvious he doesn't want to speak to me, doesn't even want to see me. He hasn't even been returning my mother's calls, and I'm unsure what to tell her. I know what Zane is like, and I know he needs space when he has to think things through, but I'm becoming impatient. When he looks at me like he doesn't know what to make of me, it makes me all the more desperate to prove that I truly do still love him.

My hands tremble as I gently put the Lily of the Valley plant that I got him on the edge of his desk, and he frowns, his expression conflicted. "I wish I had the skills to plant these," I murmur, "but I don't, so I bought them for you. Do you remember, Zane? These were the first flowers you ever gifted me. You told me that just like us, *Lily of the Valley* had a long history, and it represented apologies and a fresh start when that apology is accepted." His eyes roam over my face, and I'd give the world to find out what he's thinking. Just before my birthday, I was certain it was love I saw in his gaze — perhaps not the same kind of love we shared in the past, but love all the same. Now, I'm not so sure. He's become as unreadable as he was when we first got married, and the loss hits harder than ever before.

"You once told me you wouldn't ask for my forgiveness, and that you wanted just one chance to earn it. I'm standing here now with the same request. Will you give me a chance, Zane? Just one chance to prove that I do love you, that I'm sorry beyond words, and that your worries about us are unfounded?"

Zane pushes his chair back, creating some distance between us. Pure torment dances in his eyes, and I hold my breath. "I asked for your forgiveness because I'd been a stupid child, and I'd treated you in a less than stellar way because I didn't know how to deal with my feelings for you."

"I know. I know this isn't the same, but—"

"—but what?" he interrupts, rising to his feet. Zane runs a hand through his hair and sighs. "Celeste, this is too little, too late. I appreciate the apology, I really do, but it doesn't change anything."

My heart sinks, and I walk around his desk, fueled by desperation. “Is it?” I ask, my voice trembling. I place my palm flat on his chest, and his eyes fall closed for a moment, almost like he has to remind himself to resist my touch. It gives me hope that I’m sure he didn’t intend to instill in me. “Is it truly too late?”

His eyes snap to mine when I slowly slide my hand up and around his neck. It’s something I’ve done a thousand times, yet it never ceases to enrapture him. The way he looks at me tells me I’m right to hang on to a thread of hope.

I cup his face with my free hand, keeping his eyes on mine. “I love you,” I whisper, and emotions surge in his gaze. “Please, won’t you talk to me? I’m so incredibly sorry, Zane. I just... I was so overcome with grief, and I’d felt so betrayed, and I know that isn’t an excuse, but I...”

He sighs and wraps his hand in my hair. I lean into him, needing to be closer. “Celeste, no amount of apologies will fix what’s broken. It isn’t my intention to avoid you, I just... I don’t know what to do when you’re like this. I don’t want to hurt you, but I can’t give you what you need.”

My heart clenches painfully, and a sense of loss washes over me. “Let me try,” I plead. “Let me try to fix this.” He looks at me, his gaze filled with doubts, like he’s scared to go down this path with me again. “*Please*,” I whisper.

His forehead drops to mine, and he inhales shakily, his eyes fluttering closed. Zane freezes when I lean in and brush my lips against his, once, twice, my touch hesitant for fear he’ll pull away.

Relief rushes through me when he tightens his grip on my hair moments before his mouth comes crashing down against mine, his touch rough and tinged with the same desperation I’m feeling. I moan when I taste peppermint on his tongue and steal away his candy, earning myself a deep satisfied groan.

The way he touches me tells me it’s not too late for us yet, and I deepen our kiss, wanting to lose myself in him in the only way he’ll let me. I grab his shirt, and he pulls his lips off mine, his breathing ragged. “*Celestial*,” he whispers, his voice pained.

I look up at him, my heart on my sleeve. “You can’t tell me you don’t feel this thing between us. You once begged me to fight for us, to believe in us. I’m here now, Zane. I’m late, but I’m here, and this time, I’m here to stay.”

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Chapter Eighty-Three

ZANE

My heart wrenches when Celeste places white orchids on the coffee table in our office, a sweet smile on her face as her eyes meet mine. They're a sign of sincerity and new beginnings, and the underlying message is hard to ignore.

I've never felt more conflicted than I do right now, with the woman I've always loved quietly asking me for another chance day after day. Three weeks was all it took for me to give up on avoiding her. The way she doesn't push for my attention and quietly takes what I'm willing to give is maddening — and I suspect she knows it.

Truthfully, attempting to resist her was a fool's errand from the start. Turning my back to her in our bed only helped until she placed her hand on my shoulder and whispered my name, her voice dripping with need. Celeste has always been my weakness, and nothing will ever change that.

"Did you decide between the two projects we discussed?" she asks as she walks up to me, her long legs on display in that short black skirt. My gaze roams over her hungrily, and I watch her bite back a smirk as she pulls her hair to the side, the movement so sexy that I nearly groan. The cream-colored blouse she's wearing is undone at the top, giving me a hint of her cleavage, and it's slowly driving me insane.

She's been doing this for weeks now, slowly seducing me to remind me of how good things can be between us, and like the fool I am, I fall for it

each and every time. I'm desperate for those few moments when I lose myself in her, and nothing else matters. It's escapism and it doesn't solve a thing, but fuck, I'm weak when it comes to her.

"Both hotels could generate a high ROI, but it's a tough call," I tell her as I run a hand through my hair. "I think it's just a matter of preference at this stage."

Celeste stands next to my desk, keeping just enough distance between us to remain professional even as she bends forward to peer at my screen. I try my hardest not to notice the way her ass looks in that skirt, or the way the fabric rides up her thighs, but it's a losing battle. My wife shifts a little, and I catch a glimpse of her garters.

"I like this one best," she says, taking my mouse from me to zoom in on one of the two properties we're considering. "What do you think?"

She looks over her shoulder, and my breath hitches. It hurts to look at her, to know that we could've had it all if she'd just had faith in me, in *us*, like I begged her to. Her expression shifts, and I tear my eyes off her.

"I like them both. Honestly, I'm undecided."

She nods in agreement and pulls up the other property, placing both images side by side before leaning in and resting her elbow on my desk. Her skirt rides up further, and she tilts her hips just a little. She looks fucking irresistible bent over my desk like that, her stockings and garters on display for me, right along with her perfect ass.

"What do you think you're doing?" I ask, my hand wrapping around her thigh. My thumb brushes over the lace top of her stocking, and she whimpers, the sound needy and so fucking seductive that I nearly cave there and then.

Celeste looks over her shoulder, her gaze heated. "I'm just comparing our two investment options," she lies, her gaze fucking ravenous.

I slide my hand up until I've got it resting right at the top of her thigh, my thumb brushing against her thong. "Yeah? Is that all you're doing?"

Her hips tilt up just a touch, the movement near imperceptible. "Of course," she says, sounding just a little breathless.

It's moments like these that make it so hard to hold on to the anger. I know exactly what she's up to with the flowers, the little touches, and her sweet smiles, but I still can't fucking resist her.

A soft, needy sound escapes her throat when I slowly push her skirt up and lean in to kiss her pussy. "Okay," I whisper. "Go ahead and do that

then.”

I watch as she pulls up my analysis documents and gently trails a finger over her pussy, taking note of how wet her panties are. It’s so easy to lose myself in her, to focus solely on how good it feels to have her in my arms, but it never lasts.

Celeste moans when I push her underwear aside to coat my fingers in her wetness, my movements slow and deliberate as I circle her clit, just the way she likes it. “Zane,” she pleads when I slide two fingers inside her, giving up on her charade.

“Yeah?” I murmur as I pump my fingers into her and curl them, making her gasp. “Which of the two would you like to proceed with?”

She looks at me, and fuck, I’m completely enchanted. Those flushed cheeks and those eyes of hers that are filled with broken promises... I fell for this once, and I can feel myself going down that same road all over again.

I lean in for a taste, my cock already throbbing and desperate for her. Celeste gasps when I circle her clit with my tongue just as I curl my fingers deep inside her, punishing her for tempting me over and over again. I lap at her, intent on driving her as crazy as she drives me.

“Please,” she whispers, and I pull my mouth off her to free my cock, entirely incapable of denying her anything. My wife makes the sexiest little sound when I pull my fingers away and rise to my feet. It’s not quite a whine, but it isn’t a moan either. It’s something right in between, and I’m fucking obsessed with it.

“Turn around.” She obeys immediately and spreads her legs for me on my desk, her gaze needy. “Tell me what you want,” I murmur as I push my cock right up to her entrance, loving the way she instantly wraps her legs around me in an attempt to get me closer.

“You.” Her gaze tells me it isn’t just my body she’s asking for. “I want you, Zane. I’ll always want you.”

I groan as I push into her slowly, completely enthralled as I watch my cock disappear into her tight, wet pussy. I grab her hips, and she moans so beautifully for me as I thrust into her fully. Every day, I try to resist my wife, and every day, we end up like this. If she isn’t seducing me at work, she does it by getting into our bed naked, knowing I have no hope of denying her anything. With every touch, she chips away at my resolve, and she knows it.

I pull her in for a kiss, needing her closer, and she moans against my mouth, driving me fucking wild. I kiss her slowly, and I fuck her the same way too, taking my time, punishing her for the way she continues to torment me, day after day.

“Zane,” she whispers, pulling away a little to look at me.

I draw a shaky breath and take her in, losing myself in her eyes, in this moment. “Don’t look at me like that,” I tell her, my voice soft.

“Like what?”

My gaze roams over her face, my heart beating wildly. I miss her, even when I’ve got her in my arms, and I’m not sure that feeling will ever go away. “Like you love me.”

Heartbreak flashes through her eyes, and she leans in. “But I do,” she whispers against my lips. “I do love you, Zane.”

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Chapter Eighty-Four

ZANE

I walk into the kitchen to find my wife standing behind the stove in one of my t-shirts, and fuck, it hits me then. This is what I always wanted, but it doesn't feel the way I thought it would. Part of what made us who we were as a couple was our unwavering faith in each other, and when we lost that, we lost each other. It always felt like it was us against the world, but for the past few years, it's been us against each other.

The few good years we shared don't outweigh the bad. They never erased the torment I caused her when we were kids, and they won't erase the pain she inflicted in return. Our love will always be tainted, fractured beyond repair, but never eradicated, not fully.

Celeste looks up when I walk in, her eyes finding mine. She smiles, and my heart skips a beat. Damn it. I think I'll always react to her this way, and it hurts. It kills me to know I'll never be able to move on from her. I doubt I'll ever love anyone the way I loved her — not even her.

"Morning," she murmurs, her gaze roaming over my body and settling on the tattoo on my chest. More than once in recent days, I've found her staring at it, her expression pensive. "I'm making you breakfast. Which toppings would you like on your waffles?"

I study her, unsure whether I should just walk out of the kitchen. With nearly two more years left in our marriage, I can't avoid her forever, but

looking at her hurts too much these days. “Strawberries,” I murmur, wishing I could just ignore her.

She nods and turns back to the stove, her long hair cascading down her back. She’s beautiful, and she knows exactly what she’s doing to me, standing there in my clothes. The kitchen has, for some odd reason, always been the one place I can’t resist her in. Perhaps it’s because it’s my favorite room in the house, and she’s always been my favorite person.

Celeste has been relentless lately, in a way I can’t even get mad about. Other than entering my home office at will, she never crosses any boundaries. She isn’t trying to force me to forgive her, and she isn’t exactly pestering me either. She’s just always there, with that look in her eyes that tells me she’ll do anything to prove how sorry she is.

Every day, she walks into our office with either a new bouquet of flowers or a new plant, each with a hidden meaning. Peach-colored roses to show her love and sincerity, deep purple hyacinths to show her commitment and ask for forgiveness, pink bluebells to tell me she’ll always love me, and cream carnations to portray hopes of renewed love. I taught her the meaning of each and every one of them, and I’m surprised she still remembers it all.

Does she remember I once told her my mother used to do this for my father? Dad once told me that Mom found it nearly impossible to apologize when she was wrong, so she’d give him flowers she grew herself, showing her sincerity instead. The fact that Celeste is doing something similar is enough to get past my defenses, and she knows it.

I sigh and run a hand through my hair, my heart squeezing painfully at the sight of her. It isn’t just at the office she’s quietly but steadfastly showing me she’ll work for my forgiveness, no matter how long it takes. She’s relentless in our bed, too. Part of me wants to believe her when she turns to me at night, her touch conveying her desperation. When she kisses me, everything fades away, until there’s nothing but her and the way she still wants me. It never lasts, though. By the time the sun begins to shine through our windows, I’m reminded why we fell apart in the first place, and fear grips me tightly. This too, won’t last.

“Here you go,” she says, smiling so fucking sweetly as she hands me a plate with heart-shaped waffles, strawberries and maple syrup on top. I stare at it for a moment, my heart wrenching. Being with her shouldn’t hurt as much as it does, but fuck, despite the pain, there’s nowhere else I’d rather be.

Her hand wraps around my arm, and I snap out of my daze as she pulls me toward the breakfast bar, her expression hopeful. Neither of us says a word as we have breakfast, yet the silence speaks volumes. I sigh as I drop my fork to my plate and move to get up the moment she's done eating, but she grabs my hand and holds me in place. "Zane, didn't we say we weren't going to be unhappy anymore?"

I smile humorlessly as I turn back to face her. "But we both knew what that meant, didn't we? It simply meant we were going to get through the remainder of our marriage without trying to hurt each other. It meant we'd try to make the best of a bad situation — no more, no less." I take a step toward her and brush her hair out of her face. "Isn't that what we're doing, Celestial? There were no complaints on your lips when you begged me to fuck you harder last night, and we haven't argued about work in weeks."

Her gaze roams over my face, like she's searching for a hint of something more. "Please," she whispers. "Please tell me how to make things right."

I remember asking her the same question years ago, except I hadn't done anything requiring forgiveness. "You can't, Celeste. I know it seems like I'm punishing you, but that isn't it. There's nothing to forgive, nothing you can do. This isn't about the past, it's about the future. I can't trust that you won't lose faith in me all over again the next time someone accuses me of something, and I don't want to live with that kind of uncertainty. I don't want to feel like what we have is precarious, and I can't build any further on an unstable foundation."

She tightens her grip on my hand and draws a shaky breath as she places her palm over my chest. "You said you've never lied to me, didn't you? Does that mean that if I ask you a question right now, you'll tell me the truth?"

I hesitate and nod involuntarily, my heart racing at the mere proximity of her. "I didn't lie then, and I'm not about to start now."

She takes a step closer and slides her hand up my chest and around the back of my neck, keeping my eyes on hers. "Then tell me, Zane. Do you still love me?"

I stare at her speechlessly, entirely thrown off by her question. She sighs and pulls me closer, until my forehead drops to hers, both of us breathing hard. "You do," she answers for me. "You still love me, and that's enough for me."

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Chapter Eighty-Five

CELESTE

Zane and I are both quiet as we enter Grandma Anne's house for dinner, and for the first time in years, the silence isn't the comfortable kind. The last couple of days have been tough, and I'm unsure what to do. It'd be so much easier if Zane was angry, because that's something I know how to deal with. I'm not even sure how I'd describe his recent mood — it's a combination of hurt, disappointed, and melancholic. When he looks at me, it's like he just sees what we could've been, and no matter what I do, I'll never earn his forgiveness. He makes me feel like he'll never want the woman I am today, because I could never live up to the woman he used to love.

Zane places his hand on my lower back as he guides me through his grandmother's house, and I lean into him a little, savoring his touch. The only time I ever feel close to him anymore is when he comes to bed and I wrap my arms around his waist, pressing my face to his back. Every night, he turns around and takes me in his arms like he misses me too. Every kiss fuels my flickering flames of hope, and the way he takes me slowly, deeply, makes me hold on despite everything.

Zane's siblings look up when we enter the dining room, and I force a smile, like I do every week. Much to my surprise, Sierra and Raven both smile back at me, their gazes soft and far more welcoming than usual. The rest of the family looks equally *normal*. For once, there's no trepidation in their gazes, no hostility.

Maybe they've gotten used to my presence, or perhaps Faye's continuous attempts to include me during dinner have worn them down over the last couple of weeks. She's a gem, and arguably the sweetest in the family. No one can tell her no or deny her anything, and I've fallen victim to her charms too. "Hi Celeste," she says, smiling up at me, her blue eyes sparkling with delight. "Please tell me you've finished reading the book I lent you. I need someone to talk to about it, and Raven and Sierra are being *so slow*. Don't even get me started on Val. She refuses to even start it until the audiobook comes out!"

I try my hardest to smile for her, but I don't have it in me. I've never felt more heartbroken or more lonely. Sitting in a room full of people I love but who don't want me here is tearing at my tattered soul. "I haven't had a chance to start it yet," I tell her, my voice soft, defeated. "I'll read it soon, Faye. I'm sorry."

Her gaze roams over my face, and I glance down at my plate, my chest aching. "That's okay! How has work been, anyway? You've been so busy lately."

My hand trembles as I reach for my wine glass, my breathing shallow. For no discernible reason whatsoever, I'm on the verge of tears. I'm not sure what it is about tonight that makes everything just hit so much harder. It's a regular family dinner, just like any other, but the loss feels overwhelming tonight. "It's fine," I tell her, my voice barely above a whisper. "I heard your last piano concert was magnificent. I'm so proud of you, you know? I'll try my best to come to the next one. The tickets just sell out so insanely quickly."

Faye nods and begins to tell me I don't need a ticket, and that I should just let the Windsor concierge team know I want to go, clearly unaware that it isn't something Zane ever gave me access to. I've seen the black Windsor Bank cards all the other girls have, along with drivers assigned to them and their own security teams. Those aren't things I need at all, but it hurts to know Zane is doing all he can to prevent me from becoming too integrated into his life. There are things he's keeping from me, and we both know why — some things aren't meant for me, and he's reserving them for whoever comes after me.

I knock back my wine and place my glass down, my gaze settling on my plain wedding ring. I have no doubt this isn't the kind of ring Zane will give to the woman he actually wants as his wife — he'd want a meaningful

design, something unique that only his wife would understand, a hidden message. It's an odd thought, but one I can't drive away. More and more, I'm starting to see why he asked for a clean break once our contractual term is up. There's so much history, so many open wounds, and no matter how hard we try, that'll never change. Just like she probably wanted, Lily will always stand between us.

"We'll come too," Sierra says, exchanging a look with Raven and Val. "Why don't we go together, Celeste?"

My gaze snaps up, and I stare at Sierra for a moment, not quite sure I heard her right. "That... that would be nice," I murmur, my heart wrenching. I miss her so much, but I just know things will never be the same between us. I'm starting to learn that some things can't be fixed, and slowly but surely, I'm starting to accept it too.

"Let's go next month," Sierra says, her voice soft and a little hesitant. Zane tenses, and I nod slowly, unsure what to make of Sierra's invitation or my husband's reaction. The warning he once gave me rings through my mind, and I lower my eyes as I draw a shaky breath.

I don't want them to see you as my wife, as one of us. That place... someday, it'll belong to someone else, and when I eventually find someone I want to spend my life with, I don't want her to have to step into your shoes.

The words hurt even more now than they did then. I'm trying my hardest to hold on, but it's becoming clear that one day, I'll be a distant memory to Zane. This marriage is closure to him, and day by day, his wounds are healing, until eventually, he'll be able to let go and move on. I see it in the way his anger faded, leaving only pain and disappointment. That too will fade, until one day, he'll look at me without feeling a thing.

The girls discuss board games they want to play after dinner, and normally I'd have wanted to join them. I'd have inserted myself into their conversation and invited myself to join their games despite Sierra and Raven's obvious displeasure, but tonight, there's no fight left in me.

I quietly slip away as they all begin to chat amongst themselves once dinner wraps up, the sounds of their laughter and joy fading as I walk out onto the veranda adjacent to the dining room. A soft, warm breeze greets me, and my eyes fall closed as I tip my face up to the sky, letting the moonlight shine down on me.

"Why are you out here, Celeste?" I turn around, my hand rising to my chest when I find Lexington standing behind me, his expression conflicted.

“What is going on with you and Zane? You seemed so happy at my launch party, so what the fuck is going on?”

I wrap my arms around myself and look away. “Nothing is going on,” I tell him, my voice breaking. “It’s just... you were right, Lex.”

“About what?”

I try my hardest to smile for him, to remain brave, but it feels too difficult tonight. “I don’t deserve Zane, and it hurts to admit it, but he’s better off without me. I know that you already knew that, but I guess I’m just finally starting to accept it too.”

He crosses his arms and stares at me for a moment, his gaze contemplative. “*Celeste.*” The tone he’s taking with me now is the one he reserves for Sierra and his other sisters-in-law, and it makes me lift my head in surprise. It’s been so long since he’s addressed me so kindly. “Did you know Zane got down on his knees to beg our grandmother for your hand in marriage years ago?”

My eyes widen in shock, and he smiles ruefully. “He said something then that stuck with me. Zane told her that there’s no him without you, and it’s true. I watched him waste away for years until you walked back into his life. It’s obvious that things aren’t easy, but real love never is, is it? It’s messy, and it’s ugly at times, but it’s always worth it. I wasn’t sure about you at the start, but I’m beginning to change my mind, and I think Zane is too.”

Lex throws me a hesitant smile and steps back, glancing over his shoulder once before walking away and leaving me alone with my thoughts.

Chapter Eighty-Six

CELESTE

“I’ll teach you the recipe soon,” Grandma Anne says as she hands me a fresh batch of cookies. “It’s a family secret, and I’ll entrust you with it.”

My eyes widen, and my first instinct is to decline her offer. She throws me a pointed stare that shuts me up, and I clutch the box of cookies to my chest. What would she say if I told her I haven’t even had one of them in years? I’ve given them all to Sierra.

Grandma reaches for me and brushes the hair out of my face. “I know things feel tough right now, Celeste, but from where I’m standing, it looks like you two are finally working through your problems instead of deflecting through anger. Trust the process, and trust in each other.”

She smiles in response to the surprise that must be written all over my face and tucks my hair behind my ear. “Go on,” she says. “Go bribe Sierra with my cookies.” I blink in disbelief, and she chuckles knowingly as she sees me out. “It doesn’t seem like it to you, but you’re slowly winning over the entire family. Just keep at it, okay? Everything is going to be fine.”

“Thank you,” I murmur, unsure what exactly I’m thanking her for. It’s more than just the cookies, that’s for sure. She smiles knowingly as she walks me to my car, her gaze oddly reassuring.

I glance at the cookies in my passenger seat as I drive to Sierra’s house, feeling a lot more lost than usual. My mind has been a mess for weeks as I tried to reconcile what I thought I knew with the truth. Thinking back to my

actions fills me with remorse and shame, unlike anything I've ever felt, to a point where I'm wondering whether some of my heartache is truly my own inability to forgive myself for everything I've put Zane through.

I draw a shaky breath as I stare up at Sierra's red front door, longing hitting me harder than ever when I place the box of cookies in front of it, sounds of laughter just about audible. As I turn to leave, the door opens, and I glance back over my shoulder to find Faye standing in the doorway.

"You're here," she says, grinning. "Come in."

I freeze and shake my head, unsure how to tell her I'm not welcome here. No one knows about my agreement with Sierra, after all. "Oh, I can't," I end up saying, my face flushing.

Sierra appears behind Faye, her gaze thoughtful. "It's not like you have anything better to do," she murmurs. "And my brothers are all playing poker at Luca's house tonight, so you might as well join us."

Sierra holds out her hand, and I stare at it in surprise before placing my hand in hers. She pulls me into the house, and a bittersweet kind of ache rushes through me when I spot Val and Raven on the sofa. They both look up and smile, neither of them looking particularly surprised to see me. "I wondered how long it'd take you," Val says. "We've been waiting for you."

Raven's face flushes, and she parts her lips to refute Val's words, only to look away and cross her arms. Faye bursts out laughing as she joins Raven and wraps her arm around her shoulder. "It took me a little while to understand why Sierra kept insisting we hold anti-poker night at her house month after month."

Val nods and leans into Raven, her gaze amused. "It didn't quite click until I heard Rave ask Grandma to bake you cookies today. The way she insisted it had to be today was unlike her, and after questioning her about it, I found out it's because she knew you'd bring them to Sierra, finding us all here." Val rolls her eyes and shakes her head. "I have no idea why Sierra and Raven felt the need to resort to such childish schemes when they could've just told you they wanted you here."

Sierra crosses her arms and glares at Val, her cheeks flushed. "You were the one who said you'd stop showing up if we didn't start inviting Celeste!"

Val shrugs, a sheepish smile on her face as she swipes a shot glass off the table. "And despite that, you didn't actually invite her. You just conned her into showing up, which, to be fair, is kind of the same thing when it's you."

I take the glass from Val, and my eyes widen when I realize my name is engraved on it. They really were expecting me tonight, weren't they? "That, um..." Raven says. "Well, that's from me. Welcome to anti-poker night. I'm sorry it took us so long to invite you."

I smile, genuinely, for the first time in days, despite the tinge of rejection I feel. It's obvious they've been meeting up for months and never once thought to invite me, but I'm tired of holding grudges and letting the past hurt me. "So, what exactly is *anti-poker night*?"

Faye bursts out laughing and Val begins to pour tequila into my glass while Raven hands me a lime slice. Sierra glances at me and grins, and for a few moments, everything feels the way it used to, before I destroyed our friendship. "Anti-poker night is our monthly get-together. We make it coincide with the boys' monthly poker night and use it as a chance to catch up. Usually, tequila is involved."

She holds up her glass, and the rest of the girls follow suit, their gazes expectant as they wait for me to join in too. My hand trembles as I tap my glass against theirs before knocking it back, the liquor burning down my throat. Seconds later, Sierra pushes a lime wedge into my mouth, and I suck down on it. "You're all going to kill me," I murmur.

Faye reaches over and pats my arm in understanding. "They're actually quite merciful tonight, probably to ease you into it. Normally Val brings some ridiculously strong mezcal that her brother makes for her, and that... well... it's something else."

Val's arm wraps around my waist, and I tense, surprised by how welcoming they all are. They've been kinder recently, but I didn't think they'd ever welcome me back like this. I'd say they can't possibly know how much this means to me, but the look in their eyes tells me they do.

"So," Val says. "We've all noticed the way you've been trying to win Zane over recently, and we've got some ideas that might help you."

They all lean in, the intensity in their gazes putting me on edge. "You'd help me?" I ask, my voice breaking. "I didn't think... well... I didn't think you'd want us together."

Sierra shakes her head and refills my glass, her gaze bittersweet when she looks up at me. "I know how sorry you are, Celeste. My Mom always said that the best apology is changed behavior, and you've exemplified that. For what it's worth, I'm sorry too, and I forgive you."

I bite my lip in an attempt to suppress my tears, and Raven throws me a sweet smile. “Just like you’ve made mistakes, we did too. We never should’ve treated you the way we have, and we shouldn’t have been so stubborn when you’ve been trying so hard. I’m sorry, Celeste.”

Faye nods and hands me a lime slice. “It’s obvious Zane loves you, and it’s just as clear that you love him too. It may take a bit of time, but I know you’ll make up. Maybe it’ll never be quite the same, but maybe what you create from the shards will end up becoming something even more precious.”

“We’ll help,” Val says. “We just want you both to be happy.”

Sierra wraps her arms around me when I burst into tears, and Raven leans in closer. “I’ll let you cry tonight,” she says, her voice stern, “but as soon as you’re done, we’re going to come up with a plan, and you’re going to make Zane happier than he ever thought possible.”

I nod, hope rushing through me in a way it hasn’t before, and she smiles back at me like she understands how I feel, like she’s been there. “It’s going to be okay,” she promises, and I’m tempted to believe her.

Chapter Eighty-Seven

ZANE

“Where are we going?” I ask as I take in the familiar scenery. I’m not sure why I’m even asking when I know exactly where this road leads. How many times have I found myself driving down this street in the last couple of years, without even consciously realizing what I was doing?

Celeste parks her car in front of her old house and turns to face me. My wife’s expression is so vulnerable that my guard instantly lowers, and I sigh, unable to deny her anything when she looks at me like that. “There’s something I want to show you,” she says, her tone filled with uncertainty.

I tear my gaze off her and run a hand through my hair. I’m not sure what I was expecting when she asked for a few hours of my time today, but I hadn’t expected this.

She looks at me with such hope as she gets out of the car that I can’t help but follow her, my curiosity getting the best of me. She’s been different in the last couple of days, and I can’t quite pinpoint why. Somehow, she seems a little more courageous, a little more optimistic, even though nothing has changed between us.

Celeste’s hand slips into my mine, and she holds on tightly as she leads me into her house and right into the past. “Why are we here?” I ask as I pause in the doorway, my heart aching. Unlike mine, her house is perfectly unchanged, and the mere sight of it makes countless happy memories rush through my mind, each leaving a bittersweet trail of destruction.

She looks over her shoulder and drags me to her living room, where we've watched countless movies, made love hundreds of times. It's where she whispered she loved me for the very first time, thinking I was asleep.

She pulls me down on the sofa. "I wanted to show you this," she says as she grabs a box from her coffee table and places it between us. I suck in a breath when she opens it and carefully takes out a variety of dried flowers. "I kept one from each bouquet you've ever given me."

My hand trembles as I reach for the dried red rose from my mother's rose garden, my breathing rapidly becoming uneven. "Why?"

"Because I love you, Zane. Despite everything that happened, I couldn't let go of you, of our memories. Each time I tried, I'd burst into tears and pulled this box close to my chest, wishing I could go back in time."

She takes the rose from me and carefully places it back in the box with such care that my heart wrenches. The look in her eyes conveys how much these flowers still mean to her, and I just don't know what to make of that.

"There's more," she says, holding out her hand. I stare at it for a moment, unsure whether I should take it. I sigh as I slip my fingers between hers, giving in. She throws me a shaky smile as she pulls me up, and I follow her reluctantly. I don't understand what she's up to, and seeing how carefully she preserved our memories just confuses me further.

"It wasn't just the flowers, Zane," she says as she leads me into her bedroom. I let go of her and lean back against the wall, the room bringing back feelings I wish I could eradicate.

Celeste looks over her shoulder as she opens her wardrobe and pulls out countless of my t-shirts, letting them fall to her bed. "I stole these from you and kept them. Each time I came here, I'd wear them, even though doing so inspired more guilt than you could possibly understand."

I bite down on my lip when she kneels on the floor and pulls one of our many vision boards out from the back. Fuck. I still remember the way we'd cut photos out of wedding magazines on a Sunday night, when I'd come here after dinner at my grandma's, feeling more discouraged than ever. Celeste and I would dream of our wedding together, drowning out the pain in our present with dreams of the future. She looks up at me from her seated position on the floor, her eyes swimming with tears.

"Zane, despite what you might think, I never stopped loving you."

I push off the wall and walk toward her, unable to take that look in her eyes. I can't bear her tears, never could. She draws a shaky breath as I kneel

in front of her, and my heart fucking shatters. “I never stopped loving you either, Celeste. But love isn’t enough. Love can’t fix this.”

More tears run down her cheeks, and her eyes fall closed for a moment, almost like she’s steeling herself. “You don’t understand,” she tells me, her voice breaking. Her hands tremble as she pulls another box out of her wardrobe, and she pushes it toward me, a sob tearing through her throat as she opens it. “I always loved you, Zane, but you weren’t the only one I loved.”

I watch her as she pulls out photos of Lily and her, and vision boards filled with road trips and mockups of the offices they thought they’d have at Harrison Developments. She begins to cry in earnest but smiles through her tears as she looks at an unopened bottle of rosé, only to set it aside to grab a letter. She hands it to me, and my stomach drops when I realize what it is. Lily’s suicide letter.

“You have to understand,” she pleads. “She was like a sister to me, and I stood on that bridge with her as she told me she’d been dating you. Lily looked me in the eye and told me she couldn’t bear to watch me marry you, that she was scared I’d forgive you for what you’d done. To her, your relationship was real, and it seemed that way to me too. I was overcome with grief, and I wasn’t thinking clearly. All I could focus on was making her last wish come true, and I wanted you to feel the way I was feeling — betrayed, lost, and all alone.”

She rises to her knees and reaches for me, her trembling hand wrapping over my cheek. I look into her lost eyes, wishing I could take her pain. “Despite that, I loved you so much I couldn’t get rid of a single trace of our relationship. I believed with every fiber of my being that you’d cheated on me with my best friend, and I forgave you for it, because I love you more than I love myself, more than I ever loved *her*.”

She buries her face in her hands as sobs rack her body, and I pull her into my arms, trying my best to hold her together as she falls apart. “Celestial,” I whisper, my hand threading through her hair. I wish I knew what the right thing to do is, but I can’t make her false promises.

“I love you,” she whispers, her arms wrapping around my neck. “I love you s-so much, Zane, and I... I don’t know how to... I’m trying so hard... *please...*”

I pull her onto my lap and hug her tightly, my heart wrenching so painfully that I suck in a breath. “I love you too, Celeste Windsor,” I tell

her, leaning back to look at her. “I love you with all my heart. I always have, and I always will. I don’t know where to go from here, Goddess. Fuck, I don’t know if the trust we broke can ever be fixed, but we’ll try, okay? Let’s try.”

She searches my face like she doesn’t believe me, and I try my hardest to smile for her. I don’t know how to undo the mutual destruction we caused, but fuck, if it’s within my power, there’s nothing I won’t do for her. I know I’ll end up regretting this, but I can’t bear her tears — I never could.

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Chapter Eighty-Eight

CELESTE

I smile to myself as I carefully raise the terracotta pot holding the miniature rose plant I grew for Zane, his words still ringing through my mind.

I love you with all my heart. I always have, and I always will.

For a little while, I was beginning to doubt that he still loved me, and my endless attempts to earn his forgiveness had begun to make me feel like I was burdening him. Just as I was about to lose hope, he gave me exactly what I needed to hold on a little tighter.

I grin at the tiny roses in my arms, eager to show them to my husband. Out of everything I've given him, this is the gift I've been looking forward to most. I just know he'll love it. When Sierra learned I'd been gifting Zane plants and flowers, she nearly burst into tears, reassuring me over and over again that it was the right thing to do, and not to give up.

The girls and I collectively agreed I should keep doing what I'm doing, showing Zane my endless devotion, until he can finally believe in me again. I wish there was another way, but even they agreed that only time could heal our wounds.

I pull my plant to my chest excitedly as I roam around the house in search of Zane, only for my mood to sink when I find his home office empty.

I clutch my plant pot a little tighter as I make my way to the observatory, trepidation running down my spine. My gaze drops to my little

red roses when I reach the glass doors, and I bite down on my lip, suddenly unsure.

When we first got married, he told me the observatory was off-limits, only to take back those words on my birthday. So much has happened since then that I'm not quite sure where we stand today.

I draw a shaky breath as I take a step into the hallway that leads to the gardens. He's no longer pushing me away in the same manner he did shortly after my birthday, but I'm not sure he'll want me here. Zane has barely begun to tolerate me entering his home office, and the last thing I want to do is push his buttons unnecessarily.

I glance around at the massive space, my feet subconsciously guiding me down a familiar path. The gardens changed in the last couple of years, and my heart wrenches when I notice the absence of lily varieties in all parts of the observatory. Initially, I thought he simply couldn't see them without missing her, but that isn't the case at all. They might remind him of her, but it's because of *me*. He can't see them without thinking of what she destroyed, of my accusations, and the way he begged me to have faith in us.

I didn't understand why he looked so hurt when I told him I'd forgive him on my birthday, but in hindsight, I'm surprised his reaction wasn't worse. The pain in his eyes when he told me I couldn't forgive him for something he didn't do should've told me what I was refusing to see, even then.

I sigh as I pause in front of the pathway that leads to the rose garden, somehow certain I'll find him there, in his favorite place. Standing here, uncertain whether he'll even want me in his mother's garden just makes it all the more obvious we've enveloped ourselves in a bubble that always seems to be on the verge of breaking. I want something real, something that'll last, and I think he does too. I just don't know how to get there.

My eyes drop to my hot pink nail polish, aptly named *You're the Shade That I Want*, and I let it fuel my resolve as I take a cautious step forward, the smell of roses filling the air. It reminds me of every good memory we created, and with a little bit of luck, the good will end up outweighing the bad over time.

Soft laughter rings through the garden, and I turn toward it, startled. My gaze settles on Zane, and I take another step toward him, only to freeze when I realize he isn't alone. I stare at the familiar blonde who's dressed in

gardening trousers similar to Zane's, and my stomach twists painfully when I realize who she is — she's the woman he danced with in Hawaii.

I bite my lip as I watch my husband smile in a carefree way, his expression entirely disarmed and his gaze enraptured. He hasn't looked at me that way in years. She says something, and he laughs again, the sound filled with the kind of joy he used to share with me. Now, when he looks at me, his gaze is always a little bittersweet, like he can't look at me and just see *me*, not anymore.

I take a step back, my heart breaking. Is this why he told me he didn't want me here? Zane always said he only ever wanted to share this place with his wife. He barely even makes exceptions for his immediate family, and she definitely isn't family. Is this why he told me the observatory was off-limits to me?

My hands begin to tremble when Zane lifts the bottom of his t-shirt and pulls it to his face, using it to wipe off his sweat in a signature move he always knew I couldn't resist. We'd spend hours in this garden, chatting as he took care of his roses, and each time he pulled his tee up like that, I'd end up moaning his name within minutes.

Tears begin to fill my eyes, and my lungs burn as I try to force air into them. Who is she? Why was she allowed in here when I'm not? I still remember the way he looked at her at Dion's wedding — with such hope, and with that same enraptured look he directs her way now. Is that how long this has been going on? Has he been seeing her, meeting with her right here, in our house?

I take another step back and stumble, accidentally letting my plant pot slip between my trembling fingers. It hits the ground before I can catch it, the delicate terracotta shattering into pieces, soil spreading everywhere. Zane's gaze snaps up, and his eyes widen when he sees me. Concern flashes through his eyes, and for a few moments, I'm sure I see guilt in them too. He hadn't expected me to come here, that much is clear.

I suck in a breath and drop to my knees to gather what remains of the rose plant I spent weeks nurturing, only to cut my fingers on the pot's shards. I hiss in pain and pull my hand to my chest, a sob tearing through my throat. Blood runs down my hand, and I stare at it, my chest aching.

How come it took me so long to realize the shards of something broken *can't* be turned into something beautiful as Faye had hoped? If Zane and I keep holding on to each other's broken pieces, we'll both end up bleeding.

“Celeste,” Zane says, kneeling in front of me. He takes my hand in his, his touch gentle. “Are you okay?”

I look up at him through my tears, my heart broken beyond repair. “Who is she?” I ask, torment seeping into my voice. “H-how long... how long has this been going on?”

His expression falls, and he pulls his hands away. “She’s a botanist, Celeste. She’s just here to help me figure out why my roses are dying.”

I stare at him, unsure if I believe him. Is that how it started? Is she the reason he didn’t want me here, why he didn’t take me to the rose garden for my birthday?

“Don’t do this,” he tells me as he runs a hand through his hair. “Don’t punish me for something I didn’t do, Celeste.”

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Chapter Eighty-Nine

ZANE

Celeste doesn't say a word as she gets ready for bed, but the air between us is filled with unspoken questions. I run a hand through my hair as I sit up in bed, both frustrated and worried beyond belief. I'm not sure what I'd rather have — this heavy silence, or the way we used to argue, back when we coated ourselves in malice to protect our broken hearts from further damage.

My wife doesn't even look at me as she slips into bed wearing a red, silky nightgown that's rapidly becoming my favorite. "Just ask," I murmur, unable to take it.

Her gaze cuts to mine, and she hesitates before turning to face me, her beautiful eyes red. She looks as tired as I am, insecurity and heartache radiating off her. It kills me to see her like this, especially when I didn't do anything to deserve it. "Is she the woman from Dion's wedding?"

I nod hesitantly, somehow feeling like I did something wrong. This whole situation is maddening, and it reminds me of the way we were after Lily died. She'd continuously question me, and as time passed, I became more and more scared to say something wrong, even though I was innocent.

"Why didn't you ever tell me about her?"

I sigh and cross my arms, drawing her gaze to the tattoo on my chest. "Honestly, Celestial? It never came up. When she first started working on the rose garden, you and I were barely on speaking terms. And after? Well,

to be perfectly honest with you, it just didn't occur to me to tell you something I considered completely irrelevant. She's not quite a gardener, but to me, she might as well be. She's just someone I employ, Celeste, like our housekeeper, and the thousands of people who work for us at Windsor Hotels."

She looks like she doesn't believe me, and I don't know what to do. I hate feeling so helpless and seeing that distrust in her eyes. Once upon a time, there was such unwavering faith and trust between us. I genuinely believed nothing could come between us back then, not even my grandmother. The more time passes, the clearer it becomes that we'll never be able to return to that.

"So throughout our entire marriage, you've been spending time with her in the observatory?" Her voice breaks, and I watch her eyes flicker with torment as countless scenarios run through her mind. "I thought... I didn't..."

I stare up at the ceiling, my heart aching for everything we've lost. "Don't do this," I beg. "Please, Celeste. I can't do this with you again."

"Just... just tell me you didn't cheat on me, Zane."

I turn to look at her, my heart heavy. "I've said that before, and it didn't matter then. I'm not sure it will now, Celeste." I bury my face in my hands and take a deep breath before facing my wife again, the pain in her eyes tearing me apart. "I didn't cheat on you, Celeste. Never have, never will."

She nods and draws her knees to her chest, her posture vulnerable. "I'm sorry," she whispers. "I don't want to be this way either, but I just... for years, I thought I'd missed the signs, and when I saw you just now..."

I look away, unsure of what to say. "I get it," I murmur. "Sitting here with you just reminds me of the past, and the countless times we've done this before." I smile humorlessly as I turn my face toward her. "You want to talk about missing the signs? I saw your expression in the observatory just now, and I instantly wondered how you'd make me pay for something I didn't do all over again, just like you did back then. My mind immediately replayed all the times I'd begged you to believe in me, only for you to turn around and stab me in the back when all I've ever done is *love you*."

"Zane," she whispers, her voice breaking.

I let my eyes fall closed and take a steadying breath, feeling oddly numb despite the dull ache in my chest. "Where do we go from here, Celeste? I can't keep doing this with you, and fuck, it kills me to admit it because I

wish it wasn't true, but you and I? Celestial, we're not happy together." She begins to cry in earnest, and I reach for her, unable to take her tears.

She comes willingly, and I hold her in my arms, my own heart breaking alongside hers. "Trying not to be *unhappy* isn't the same as genuinely being happy," I whisper, and she nods, her arms wrapping around me as she straddles me. We sit together like that, unable to look each other in the eye. "Tell me, Celeste. Do you truly believe we can regain the kind of love we used to have? We used to be a united front, and look at us now. You're convinced I'm cheating on you with our botanist after observing me working alongside her for all of five seconds, and I'm sitting here terrified you'll find a way to hurt me for it."

My wife looks into my eyes then, her gaze searching. "I want to," she whispers. "I *want to* believe in us, Zane."

I cup her face and swipe at her tears with my thumbs, my heart heavy. "But do you? You couldn't even believe in me long enough to ask me what was going on. I saw it in your expression, Celeste. You condemned me without even giving me a chance to defend myself. *Again.*"

"I'm sorry," she says, choking back a sob. "I just... I wasn't thinking clearly, Zane."

It's on the tip of my tongue to say that she wasn't thinking clearly then either, but I bite back the words. "I love you," I tell her instead. "I love you, Celeste, but love was never the problem between us. You don't trust me, and no matter how hard I try, I don't think I'll ever trust you again either."

I drop my forehead to hers, and fuck, it hits me then. Even when I've got her in my arms, I miss her. I miss what we used to have, and it devastates me to know we'll never regain that.

Celeste presses her palm against my chest and slides the other around the back of my neck. "Are we just trying to force something into existence?" she asks, her voice trembling. "Are we holding on to something that isn't there anymore?"

I look away, unable to give her the answer she's looking for. Celeste squeezes her eyes closed. Her long lashes flutter when she looks at me, her gaze resigned. "It's over between us, isn't it?"

My heart clenches painfully as I look into my wife's eyes, unsure what to say, what to even think. "I don't know," I murmur. "I desperately want to try to make things work, but maybe we shouldn't. We can't forcibly fix things, Celeste, no matter how much either of us wants to."

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Chapter Ninety

CELESTE

I draw a shaky breath as the elevator in Archer's building rises to the top floor, my heart heavy with grief. My gaze drops to my suitcase, and I bite my lip to keep from crying. Zane didn't have to say it for me to know it's true — it's over between us. It has been for far longer than either of us wanted to admit.

I draw a steadying breath before ringing Archer's doorbell, well aware that I can't show up in tears. My brother has always been a little overprotective, and the last thing I want to do is cause more conflict.

The door swings open, and I blink in surprise when I find a beautiful girl with long dark hair standing in front of me, wearing one of the *Raven Windsor Couture* t-shirts I bought for Archer. She looks just as surprised to see me as I am to see her, and for a moment, we just stare at each other.

"Hi," she says eventually, her tone uncertain. "Can I help you?"

I push my hair behind my ear and frown. "Um, is Archer home?"

I should've called ahead instead of rushing out without thinking, but I needed a bit of space to think, and this was the first place I thought of. I lived right next door to Archer for years after Zane and I broke up, and in many ways, his house still feels like home, even more so than our parents' house.

Besides, if I'm truly honest, I needed someone to talk to. Someone who knows Zane, Lily, *and* me. Someone who would understand.

“Yes,” she says, her expression falling as she steps back. I raise a brow when I recognize her expression — jealousy, followed by defeat. “He’s... well, Archer is in the shower. He should be out shortly.”

“Right,” I murmur as I walk into Archer’s foyer, my chest aching. “You look familiar. Have we met before?”

She frowns and follows me when I walk into the kitchen to pour myself a glass of water, her expression becoming stormier by the second. “No,” she says, crossing her arms. “I’d remember if we’d met.”

I raise a brow, my curiosity piqued. “How so?”

“I remember every girl Archer has ever introduced me to, and you aren’t one of them.” She looks away then, her gaze tormented. “Not yet, anyway.”

I smile, unable to help myself. “How about I just introduce myself, then?” I tell her, my grief lifted for the first time since I left home. “I’m Celeste Windsor, and I’m incredibly curious who you are and why you’re wearing a limited edition t-shirt, I bought for my brother years ago.”

I notice the exact moment she recognizes my name, her eyes widening in shock. She glances down at her clothes, her cheeks instantly becoming rosy. That mildly smug look she was wearing makes way for embarrassment, and I bite back a grin.

“You’re Archer’s younger sister,” she says, blushing fiercely. I smile as she pushes her hair behind her ear, suddenly not quite sure where to look. “I’m Serenity. I’m Archer’s business partner’s younger sister. My brother just moved in next door a few months ago, but we’re just staying here for a little while because a pipe burst in his apartment, and I’m, well, I’m doing an internship at their firm, so I’m staying here too.”

She does that thing that I do when I’m nervous, and it instantly makes me like her. It’s obvious there’s more to this story, and normally I’d probably have done what Sierra would do and offered to buy her a drink so I could find out more. Today, though, I don’t have it in me.

Just as she’s about to say something else, Archer walks in, his hair still wet and his usual house clothes on — gray sweats and a tee. “*Celeste?*” He freezes as his gaze runs over my face. I throw him a shaky smile, and Archer sighs as he holds open his arms. “What happened?”

My lightheartedness melts away as I stare up at my big brother, and tears rapidly fill my eyes as I walk toward him. Archer’s arms wrap around me, and I begin to sob. He doesn’t say a thing as he holds me, his hand

gently patting my back the way he used to when we were kids. “What did he do?” His voice is dripping with anger, and I shake my head as I bury my face against his chest.

“Nothing,” I tell him, tightening my grip on him.

Archer pulls away to look at me. “Celeste,” he says, his tone conveying his concern. “You wouldn’t show up here out of the blue if nothing happened.”

I inhale shakily and steel myself. “I fucked up, Arch.” My brother looks into my eyes, his gaze searching. “I just... I needed some time to think, and I wasn’t sure where else to go. You’ll let me stay, won’t you?”

He nods instantly. “Of course, but I think it’s time you tell me exactly what happened between Zane and you years ago. The only reason I agreed to that merger was because I knew you two still loved each other, so honestly, what the fuck is going on?”

He leads me to the sofa, and I glance around, glad to find Serenity gone. It’ll be hard enough to tell this story as it is, and harder still with someone I don’t know around. Archer sits opposite me as I tell him everything that happened, everything I did, and everything I’ve learned since.

Archer just listens, his gaze on the floor, like he’s trying his best to hide his reactions from me. “Fuck. I never even... Celeste, have you been carrying all this weight by yourself the entire time? Did you even talk to anyone about Lily, and what you learned about her?”

I look up at my brother with tears in my eyes and shake my head, unsure of what to say. “I just... I’m still trying to process it, but that isn’t what brought me here, Arch.” I tuck my hair behind my ear and draw a shaky breath. “I didn’t understand why Zane told me love wasn’t enough, but I get it now. I just don’t know if I’m the right person for Zane anymore, and I just needed some time to think. He’s still everything to me, but I just... I just don’t want to be selfish with him anymore. Being with me is clearly tough for him, and I don’t want our marriage to feel like punishment to my husband.”

I force a smile, my heart aching. “Archer, I’m so scared that he’s right, that there’s no trust between us, and that what was broken can’t be fixed.” I look down, unable to take the pity in my brother’s eyes. “It’s gotten to a stage where I’m not even sure I trust myself anymore. I’m genuinely wondering if Zane has a point, and I’m just choosing to be with him now because it’s easier, when it wasn’t before. It’s not normal for either him or

me to wonder that, you know? I just want him to be happy, and I'm starting to see he can't be with me."

Archer leans forward and gently swipes away my tears the way he used to when we were kids. "Celeste, Zane is right about one thing — love isn't always enough." My expression falls, and he smiles at me. "But it does make for a solid foundation, one that's stronger than he seems to think it is. I can't tell you what to do, kiddo, but tell me this: do you genuinely believe Zane could be happier without you? Because I don't think so, Celeste. If he could have moved on, wouldn't he have done that in the years you lived here with me? Instead, he didn't even try. Zane never let you go, and if I know the man at all, he never will."

He sighs and tucks my hair behind my ear. "He was right to say you can't force him to forgive you, though. Honestly? If I were him, I'm not sure I would. I get where you were coming from, Celeste, but you really fucked up, and you need to make it right. Not only that, you need to give him a real choice, and he doesn't have that right now, not with the way you were forced together."

I burst into tears, wishing Archer wasn't right. My brother just sighs and hugs me tightly. "I'll do what I can to help you fix this, alright? I love that asshole too."

Chapter Ninety-One

ZANE

My house has never felt more empty than it has in recent days, and I can't help but feel deeply unsettled as I walk to the kitchen. I stare at the seat by the breakfast bar, the same one she's claimed as her own, and my heart just fucking wrenches.

My hands tremble as I reach for the miniature rose plant she grew for me, my gaze roaming over the gold that I repaired the pot with, creating something truly precious from the broken pieces using the *kintsugi* technique. All the while I'd wondered if we could fix things between us that way too, by filling the gaps with precious new memories.

From the moment Celeste left, I've been wondering if truly letting her go is what's best for both of us, but fuck, I didn't expect to miss her this much.

It hits me then. I'd rather fight with her day and night than live a life she isn't part of — even if we can't have what we used to have, even if we never fully recover from everything we've been through. I want her — the woman she is today, the one who would've forgiven me even if I'd truly betrayed her in the worst way, like she thought I did.

"Fuck," I whisper, my hands threading through my hair. "What the fuck am I doing?"

I turn on my heel and grab my phone, dialing our security team. "Zane?" Silas says, his voice tinged with concern. "What's going on?"

“Silas, where is my wife? I need you to find her for me right now.”

I can hear him type as I get into my car, only for him to sigh in obvious irritation. “That’s the second time you’ve called me to track Celeste when she’s literally on the Windsor Estate. What is it with you Windsor brothers and your weird requests related to your wives?”

I pause, confused. “Where exactly is she?”

Celeste told me she was going to Archer’s house for a few days, so how come she’s here? And if she did come back, why didn’t she come home? Unease begins to settle in my stomach, and I tighten my grip on my steering wheel as I wait for Silas’s answer.

“She appears to be at your grandmother’s house.”

I raise a brow and thank Silas before ending the call, worry gnawing at me as I drive over to Grandma’s. Celeste’s defeated voice keeps ringing through my head, and my heart begins to hurt. I should’ve held her close, and I never should’ve let her go.

I’m restless as I walk into my grandmother’s house, only to freeze in surprise when I see Celeste’s grandfather sitting on the sofa next to my grandmother, Celeste in front of them with her back turned toward me. She hasn’t noticed me yet — how could she, over the force of her sobs?

“I’m sorry,” she tells both of our grandparents. “I know you two had high hopes for us, and though I don’t understand why, you both clearly hoped we could make it work. I wish I could tell you your efforts weren’t in vain, but they were.” My wife runs a hand through her hair, tangling it into her curls. “I’ll forfeit my inheritance if you’ll just let him go.”

Shock courses through me, and Celeste turns her head toward her grandfather, who looks equally surprised. “I know you’ve always been disappointed in me, Grandpa, so this won’t come as a surprise to you. Archer told me he’s willing to step in and do what he must to make this happen. While he still can’t give up on his company for you, he’s willing to work twice as hard to take over my workload and become the successor you’ve always dreamed of.”

What? What the fuck?

Celeste sniffs, and it takes all of me to keep standing here. “You need to set Zane free, Grandma Anne. We’ve been married for over a year, and it’s clear I can’t make him happy. He can’t look at me without thinking of the past, and he deserves to be free of it. Zane deserves the kind of happiness

that's completely untainted. He deserves joy and laughter, and the kind of fun we used to have, the kind that just doesn't exist between us anymore."

Celeste straightens in her seat, and I take a step closer, my heart aching. My grandmother freezes for a split second when I move into her line of vision, but she doesn't look at me. "This marriage did what you thought it would, Grandma Anne. It gave him the closure he needed, and after this, he'll probably need a little bit of time to heal. Please give him that by setting him free now, instead of making him suffer through the next two years with me. If you do, he'll be that much closer to real happiness, the kind I wish I could give him. That's what you want for him, isn't it?"

"I'm sorry, Celeste," Grandma says, her tone unwavering. "But I can't do that. You both signed a contract for three years, and you'll have to see those years through. You cannot simply forfeit your inheritance without Zane having to forfeit his too."

My wife rises to her feet and does what I once did for her. She kneels in front of my grandmother and grabs her hands. "I know you want him to be happy," she says, her voice breaking. "Please allow him to divorce me. Can't you see how much it hurts him to have to look at me? I swear to you we've tried all we could, and for a little while, I thought we could be happy, but it never lasts. Zane deserves more than brief moments of joy. He should have what we used to have — the kind of love that fills you with unwavering confidence in each other, the kind where you're a team, and it's you against the world. He deserves the kind of marriage his parents had, and I... I can't be the one to give him that, no matter how badly I wish I could."

"Is that true?" Grandma asks, looking up at me. "I'll give you one chance, Zane. Right here, right now. Tell me you're not sure Celeste can make you happy, and I'll grant you two a divorce without repercussions."

I walk up to my wife and shake my head. "No," I say, my voice firm, not a doubt in my mind. Her shoulders sink, and her eyes fall closed in resignation, pure heartbreak crossing her face as she clearly misunderstands my answer. "That isn't true."

Celeste's eyes flutter open as I reach for her, and she gasps when I bend down and lift her into my arms, the way I always used to. "Don't give up on us yet, Celestial," I tell her as I turn and carry her out of the room, my mind made up.

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Chapter Ninety-Two

ZANE

“Where are you taking me?” my wife asks when I park my car in front of our private jet, where Lex is already waiting for us. I reach for Celeste and take her in my arms, unable to let her go. She gasps and wraps her arm around my neck as I carry her onto the plane, her startled expression earning her a chuckle from Lex when we pass him. “Zane?”

“You’ll see,” I tell her, every inch of my body reluctant as I place her down in her own seat, when all I want to do is hold her close.

Celeste studies me as Lex enters the cockpit, her gaze roaming over my face with the same kind of longing I’m feeling. “You’re only delaying the inevitable,” she tells me eventually, moments before the plane takes off. “You should have taken your grandmother’s offer. We both know it was a one-time deal.”

“Celeste Windsor. I will never let you go. Fuck, Celestial, I couldn’t even stand the thought of not being on your mind in the years we were apart — that’s why I attacked Harrison Developments the way I did, why I never let it go so far that you couldn’t recover.”

My wife studies me quietly, cautious hope flickering in her eyes. “We tried,” she says, her voice breaking. “For months now, we’ve done nothing but try to make this work.”

“No. We didn’t. We hid behind our wounds and threw blame around the moment things got tough. We didn’t try, Celeste — I didn’t, not the way

you deserve.”

She falls silent, her eyes fluttering closed for a moment. “This won’t change anything, Zane. We’ll just end up with more regrets.”

I stare at her as she looks out the window, and for the first time since we got married, I’m filled with unwavering confidence. “I’d regret it a whole lot more if I didn’t do this, if we didn’t give this a real shot — not the way we have before, without giving you my all.”

She falls silent and stares at me throughout the flight, her expression cautious. It’s like she wants to believe in us but just doesn’t know how to.

“Where are we?” she asks, breaking the silence between us as the plane begins to descend.

I smile at her. “My private island.” Celeste’s eyes widen, and I grin at her as we land, stopping right outside the mansion I had built here.

Lex steps out of the cockpit and levels us both with a stare. “Let me just make one thing clear,” he says as we rise from our seats. “I’m turning this plane around immediately, and I will not pick you up until I’m certain you’ve worked things out. I have never seen a couple that’s been through more than you’ve been without losing the love that’s still so obviously there between you. Do not let your insecurities and the past ruin what is bound to be a great future.”

I nod at my younger brother, and he sighs as his gaze settles on Celeste. He reaches for her and musses her hair as she walks past him, and she looks back at him, something passing between them. “It’s going to be okay,” he tells her. “You belong with us, Celeste. This is what family does — we argue, we fall out with each other, but we always find our way back.”

She swallows hard, and I lock my jaw when she rushes past Lex, a tear running down her face. I glare at him and knock my shoulder against his, *hard*. “You made my wife cry, asshole,” I mutter.

Lex laughs and shakes his head. “Damn. I’ll never be that whipped,” he says to himself, and I grin as I follow my wife, knowing that isn’t true — it’s a Windsor trait. Our wives own us, and I let myself forget it for a little while.

Celeste tenses when I grab her hand, and she looks at me with such hesitation that regret, unlike anything I’ve ever felt before, rushes over me. I sigh and entwine our fingers as I lead her to the front door. My wife is rarely this quiet, and I haven’t seen her look this defeated in a long time, not

since the first time she attended family dinner with me — and even then, it wasn't quite this bad. She looks at me like she's ready to let me go.

I throw her a hopeful smile as I pull her into the house, and she gasps, her grip tightening when she realizes I'm a lot further from moving on than she seems to think I am. "You and I, Celeste... we've always been far more similar than either of us ever wanted to admit. It's why we work so well when we aren't standing in our own way." When she lifts her face to look at me, my beautiful wife looks entirely disarmed. "Just like you kept your old house intact, I kept our memories too."

I pull her through the house that now holds all of our old furniture, all our memories. Celeste begins to cry as her fingers trail over my white fabric sofa, the one that played a key role in our most precious memories, and she sniffs as she glances at the coffee table we picked together.

"I never let you go," I tell her, "and I'm not about to do so now."

She follows me to the kitchen, the design similar to my old one, and she bites down on her lip as a tear spills from her eyes. I try my hardest to force a smile for her, and she tries to smile back when I reach for her and lift her on top of the kitchen counter.

Her legs part for me, seemingly without thinking, because that's just how many times we've stood like that together. My hands wrap around her waist, and I lean in, my forehead dropping against hers. "I'm sorry," I whisper. "I'm so sorry, Celestial."

She draws a shaky breath, and I dip my head, my lips brushing against hers, once, twice, before I kiss her softly, my touch conveying my regret. We're both breathing hard when I pull away to look at her, the air between us filled with the kind of hope that scares us both.

"I'm sorry for getting mad at you when I should've reassured you. I'm sorry for not being more understanding, and for not reciprocating all your efforts. Instead of seeing the situation for what it is, I viewed it through a lens that's tainted by the past, and it wasn't fair."

She looks away, her shoulders sagging, and I can tell she doesn't know what to think, doesn't have any faith in us anymore.

I cup her cheek and turn her face toward me. "I should've understood it'll take time to heal, and that broken trust can't be fixed overnight. Instead of getting mad or being disappointed with your reaction, I should've understood and worked with you. I should've reassured you, but instead, I condemned you for showing me your wounds. Just because I didn't cheat

on you doesn't mean you aren't suffering from the emotional wounds the entire situation left you with, and as your husband, I failed you by not supporting you the way I should have."

"Zane," she whispers, her voice trailing off.

I shake my head. "I love you, Celeste Windsor — just as you are today. Neither of us is perfect, and I should've shown you more grace. The truth is I was scared, and I'd been expecting the worst from you. Because of that, I ended up doing exactly what I accused you of. I took the easy way out by pushing you away, over and over again, despite your best attempts to fix us."

She looks into my eyes, her gaze filled with cautious hope. "What does that mean?" I know what she's asking — how do my words change anything when her best efforts didn't seem like enough?

"Let me fight for you, for us. Give me a chance to be the man you think I am, to love you the way you deserve to be loved. Let's find a way to face our past and overcome it, instead of dancing around each other in an attempt not to pour salt into open wounds. Celeste, I want this with you, even if we can never regain the kind of happiness we had, even if our best attempts lead to only a fraction of it."

She places her hand on my chest, and I smile, my heart racing as I wait for her answer. "Won't we just be prolonging the pain? Some things can't be fixed, Zane."

I shake my head and bury a hand in her hair. "Maybe not, but we can rebuild from the ruins."

My beautiful wife draws a shaky breath and leans in to rest her head on my shoulder. My eyes fall closed as my arms wrap around her, and she sighs when I hug her tightly.

This time, I won't let her go.

Chapter Ninety-Three

ZANE

“It’s going to happen again,” my wife tells me as she extends her legs on the beach, her white dress stained with sand. “The insecurity and jealousy won’t just go away overnight.” We’ve been here for three weeks now, both of us shirking our responsibilities without a single care for anything but each other. Our grandparents may be retired, but they’ll manage for a couple of weeks. They’ll have to, because nothing matters more than the woman sitting next to me.

“Then we’ll let it happen,” I tell her, my tone reassuring as I lie back on the sand, my eyes on the starry sky for a moment, before I turn to look at her. “We’ll go through the motions over and over until you trust me again. I just ask that you give me the same grace, Celeste. When my initial response isn’t quite right, please give me another chance and see through the pain. Be patient with me, Goddess. There will be times I’ll find your inability to trust me the way you used to unfair, and at times, I’ll lash out because I can’t quite trust you in return. I’d be lying if I said I’m not scared I’ll mess up somehow, or something might happen that you’ll misunderstand, and you’ll retaliate like you have before.”

She looks away, her gaze pensive. We’ve had countless conversations, but this is one we revisit almost every day in our attempts to make things work between us. Celeste and I discussed the past at length, both of us telling the other what we were thinking and how we were feeling, and how

that still affects us today. It helps to know where she's coming from, to see the disconnect between her feelings, her fears, and the truth that didn't diminish any of it, but that did seem to invalidate it in her eyes.

In my efforts to push Celeste away for fear she'd hurt me all over again, I failed to truly understand her, failed to put myself in her shoes. That's not a mistake I'll make again.

"I just don't want to make you unhappy, Zane. My biggest fear is that one day you'll look back and wish you'd just let me go. I'm scared that trapping you in this marriage is depriving you of a chance to have a fresh start."

I grin and reach for her hand. She takes it instantly, and I pull her closer until she's lying right next to me, both of us facing each other. "Who says I can't have a fresh start?" I ask. "You're giving me one right now, aren't you? I don't want this with anyone but you — never have, never will. You are it for me, Celeste. I fell in love with you when I was fifteen, and I've been in love with you ever since."

I lift her hand to my face and turn her palm toward me. Celeste's breath hitches when I bring her wrist to my lips. "I vow to love you, and only you, forever and always. Through the ups and downs, I'll be faithful, compassionate, and patient. I've loved you through all the seasons in life, Celeste, and I'll continue to do so. Day after day, I will choose you, no matter what. That, my beautiful Celestial, is a vow." I kiss the inside of her wrist, and she inhales sharply as she looks into my eyes, the sounds of waves crashing filling the air. Every day, I've made her new vows, ones that are untainted by the past, and each new one makes her smile in a way that lights up her whole face. The warm breeze makes her hair dance, and I don't think she's ever looked more beautiful.

I pull our joined hands to my chest, and she reaches for me, cupping my face with her free hand. "I love you," she says. "I'm so scared, Zane, but I want this with you."

I grin at her, feeling fully at ease for the first time in years. Nothing has ever felt more right than lying here with her in this moment, the starry sky above us and the waves crashing near our feet. "Then choose me, Celeste. Every single day, over and over again, no matter how hard of a choice that can be at times."

"I do," she says, and I breathe a sigh of relief. Can she feel it in the air? Something is different tonight, almost like we've finally let go of

everything that stood between us, like the endless conversations did what we both quietly hoped they would. “I do, Zane, and I vow to continue doing that for as long as you’ll let me.”

I pull my wife close, my hand wrapping into her hair as I dip my head to kiss her. My touch is desperate tonight, filled with silent promises I can’t wait to uphold, and she responds in kind. “God, I love you,” I whisper against her mouth, and she whimpers, her hand wrapping around the back of my neck.

I chuckle and run my hand down her body, grabbing her leg and pulling it over my waist, earning myself the sweetest smile. Fuck, I don’t think I’ll ever get enough of her. “See?” I tell her as I turn us over. She lands on her back, a soft gasp escaping that sexy little mouth of hers. “Moments like these make everything worth it. We could argue like crazy, and just one single smile from you would still make it the best day of my life.” Her hair spreads across the sand beautifully, and I hold myself up on my forearms, taking a moment to just look at her — really look at her. I’ve loved her since I was a child, and fuck, she truly does seem to get more beautiful every time I lay my eyes on her.

It’s the way she still smiles at me like she used to, the way her gaze is filled with a look that’s always only been mine, and it’s that little sigh when her gaze roams over my face, only to settle on my lips. “I love you,” I tell her, the force of it hitting me suddenly. My eyes fall closed, and I drop my forehead to hers, my breathing erratic. “The good, the bad, and everything in between. I love all of it, Celeste, every single part of you.”

“Zane,” she whispers against my lips in that way she knows I can’t resist. “I love you more.”

I chuckle and pull away to look into her eyes. “Impossible,” I whisper, my heart overflowing. I take in the stunning shades of brown and amber before letting my gaze roam down. “Did you know you’re the only woman I’ve ever kissed? I’ve never wanted anyone but you, Celeste. That will never change. You truly are it for me, and you have been from the moment I learned what it meant to be in love.”

She tenses underneath me, her expression torn, like she isn’t sure she believes me. “But when we were in Hawaii,” she begins to say, her voice trailing off. She’s battling her insecurities, and I watch the fight leave her eyes as she takes a moment to choose her words, the way we agreed to.

“I told you I always find myself buried deep inside the women I share a bed with. It was a petty remark meant to hurt you, but it wasn’t a complete lie. I just failed to mention the only woman I’d ever fallen asleep next to was you, and baby, we both know that before then, we’d never gone to bed without you seducing me first.”

She parts her lips, a gleeful kind of shock flashing through her eyes. “I never seduced you!” she says, her voice filled with mirth.

“No? Then what do you call this thing you’re doing that’s making your chest rise and fall against me so seductively?”

She bites back a smile and shakes her head. “It’s called breathing, Zane.”

“Seduction, that’s what it is.”

“Okay, In-Zane. Just wait till you catch a glimpse of my ankles. That’ll really blow your mind.”

I laugh with her and bury a hand through her hair, my eyes on hers. “Yeah? You’ll have to show me.”

I kiss her, and her nails rake over my scalp in a needy way as she opens up for me, her tongue tangling with mine. The way she hooks her leg over my hip makes me moan, but the way she rolls her hips is what does me in. “Celestial,” I whisper, my breathing ragged.

Her lashes flutter, and she looks into my eyes as her hand slips underneath my t-shirt, her gaze needy. I obey her silent commands and push off her for a moment, dragging my tee up and over my head. She sucks in a breath when it hits the sand, and my heart skips a beat. I don’t think I’ve ever been more in love with her.

My wife throws me a provocative look as she reaches for her dress and pulls it up, and I just stare at her, enchanted. She looks fucking breathtaking in the moonlight, thousands of stars above us. Her hair moves with the warm breeze, and she smiles when I hook my fingers around her panties.

“It’s crazy that you’re mine,” I murmur without thinking.

Celeste smiles as I drag the fabric down her legs, my movements slow and intentional tonight. She follows my lead the moment I finish undressing her, and I grin as she pushes my boxers down with a lot less patience. The way she wants me will never get old.

“I’ve always been yours,” she says when I settle between her legs, the wind caressing our bodies. “It’s only ever been you for me, too, Zane.”

“What?” I ask, disarmed.

She nods and smiles sweetly as one of her hands runs down my chest, the other settling in my hair. “Only you,” she whispers, her fingers curling around my cock as she lines me up.

I look into her eyes, needing to know. “You were engaged to someone else,” I whisper, my tone harsher than intended.

Celeste nods and rolls her hips, making me push into her a fraction. “And yet you’re the only man I’ve ever kissed, Zane. The only one that’s ever touched me like this.”

My breathing is erratic as I push into my wife a little deeper, my need for her incomprehensible. “Mine,” I whisper, my eyes fluttering closed for a moment.

“Yours,” she agrees mindlessly, and I push all the way into her, unable to take it. She feels too good, and my emotions are overflowing tonight. My desire to be close to her is insatiable.

Celeste moans and hooks her legs around my hips, her head falling back. Fucking stunning. “Look at you,” I murmur, entirely mesmerized. “Look at the way you’re moaning for your husband. The way you take my cock is fucking breathtaking, Celeste.”

“Oh God,” she whispers when I move my hips and begin to thrust shallowly, taking my time with her. I’ve never felt closer to her, never felt more united. I didn’t even realize how much I missed this.

“You’re so beautiful, Celeste. Do you have any idea how crazy it is that I get to call you my *wife*? Fuck, I might well be the luckiest man alive.”

She smiles and pulls my lips to hers. “I don’t know about that. But I definitely am the luckiest woman in the world, because I still get to call you mine.”

“I’ll always be yours,” I promise, her as my hand runs down her body until I’ve got it nestled over her hip. I pull out almost entirely, loving the way she whimpers for me, before thrusting back into her hard and fast, taking her the way she likes it, and I just know I’ll never get enough of her.

Ten years from now, I’ll still love her the same.

Chapter Ninety-Four

ZANE

Celeste turns toward me as I pull up in front of her parents' house, throwing me the most adorable puppy eyes. "I don't want to go, babe. I just want to spend all day in bed with you," she says, her voice all cutesy.

I bite down on my lip as I turn to face my wife, so fucking tempted to do as she asks, and drive straight back home. The last two weeks have been heartbreakingly beautiful — there's no other way to describe the way the walls between us came down, both of us filled with cautious hope and so much love that it's barely containable. The island changed everything for us. We're no longer running from the past — instead, we've embraced it in an effort to move past it. We can't change what happened, but we can decide whether we let it control us, whether we'll let it dictate our actions.

Overcoming trauma isn't easy, but our couple counseling sessions are helping more than either of us could've expected. I always thought I knew my wife better than anyone else, but it's becoming clear there's so much I didn't understand — not truly. I was so caught up in the injustice of the entire situation that I failed to truly think about what drove her, and how much she's still grieving a woman neither of us really knew in the end.

"*Celestial*," I reprimand. "I'm already on your mother's shit list for missing so many cooking sessions. Are you trying to get me killed?"

She sighs and reaches for me, her touch gentle as she cups my face and pulls me in for a kiss. "But if you take me home, I'll ride you the way you

like,” she whispers against my lips. “Isn’t that more fun than being ordered around by my mom all day?”

I groan as I kiss her, my resolve wavering. Lately, it feels like I’m rediscovering my wife all over again, even though she’s been by my side all along. Maybe I wasn’t truly letting her in, not until I nearly lost her all over again. Everything has felt different ever since I took her to my private island, the distance that was always between us diminishing a little more every day.

Celeste gasps when I pull away from her, and the way she pouts at me makes my heart skip a beat. “Zane,” she pleads, her tone whiny.

I chuckle and peck that delectable mouth of hers. “No way,” I tell her. “You don’t understand how scary your mom is, do you?”

She groans in defeat when I get out of the car and throws me a cute little glare as I walk around it to offer her my hand. Fucking adorable. I entwine our fingers and pull her to the front door, loving the way she melts into me.

“There you are,” Clara says when we walk into the kitchen. Her eyes drop to our joined hands, and she grins at me. Sometimes she looks at me with such a proud gaze, and it makes me feel so accepted. I wasn’t sure if she’d ever forgive me for what I put Harrison Developments through, but she never even mentioned it. The only thing she ever said that even remotely referenced the past was that she missed me, and that she’s happy Celeste and I found our way back to each other.

“I’m thinking of making ratatouille today. What do you think, Zane?”

Celeste sighs and wraps her hand around my waist as she leans into me. “I’m here too, you know. You only ever ask Zane for his input.”

Clara throws her daughter one of her classic deadpan expressions. “Yes, because he can actually cook. Years of lessons and you still can’t fry an egg without burning it.”

I press my lips together to keep from laughing, and Celeste narrows her eyes at me. “You’re good at other things,” I tell her, before pressing a kiss to her temple. She’s started to make me breakfast on weekends, but she always burns at least one thing. I haven’t mentioned it, and eat everything she makes me with a smile on my face, but my beautiful wife is just not... a great cook.

Clara nods. “You’re especially good at gathering vegetables from the veggie patch,” she says, her tone filled with mock indulgence. “So why don’t you go do that, sweetie?”

My beautiful wife pouts before she turns on her heels and storms out, and I chuckle as I follow her, my heart racing. Some days I'm not sure we'll make it, but then there are days like today, and they make it all worth it.

Celeste looks over her shoulder and smiles as her gaze roams over my body, slowly taking in my jeans and the black tee I'm wearing today. "I'm going to steal this one," she tells me, nodding to herself, and I burst out laughing as I grab her and push her up against the side of the shed, just out of view from any of the windows.

"Celestial, you already have a massive collection of my t-shirts. What do you need this one for?"

She places her palm against my chest and tilts her head up to look at me. "I've got this whole nefarious plan," she tells me as she slips her hand underneath my t-shirt, a slow smirk spreading across her face when my abs instantly tense underneath her fingers. "If I steal them all, you won't have anything to wear, and then I can keep you naked in our bed forever."

I burst out laughing, pure joy spreading through my entire body. "Fuck," I whisper, my forehead dropping to hers. "I love you."

She gasps, like she still isn't used to hearing those words again, and her lips crash against mine. I moan and bury a hand in her hair, fucking enchanted by the way her body moves against mine, the way she parts my lips and deepens our kiss, like she can't get enough of me.

Her hands roam over my body, and it's my turn to gasp when she undoes my jeans and lets her hand slip into my boxers. "Crazy girl," I whisper against her mouth, before lifting her up against the shed.

Celeste's legs wrap around me, and she rolls her hip teasingly. "Just saying," she murmurs against my lips just as she grabs my cock and squeezes. "If you'd just taken me home we'd be in bed right now, and you'd be buried deep inside me."

I nip at her bottom lip punishingly, and she threads a hand through my hair, her nails raking over my scalp. "Can you be quiet for me?" I ask as I move a hand between us and push her dress aside to stroke her pussy over the silky fabric. "If you'll be a good girl for me and stay perfectly silent, I'll fuck you right here, right now."

"Yes," she pleads, her eyes darkening. "I'll be so good, Zane."

I grin at her as I push her panties aside, and she lines my cock up, my forehead pressed to hers. My breath hitches when I push into her, and she bites down on her lip in an attempt to suppress her moans, only for a soft

little whimper to escape her lips anyway. It's so fucking sexy I can barely take it.

I hold on to her hips tightly as I thrust all the way into her, and her head falls back, her lips parting beautifully as her eyes find mine. "You're so fucking ethereal, Goddess," I whisper as I fuck her slowly, deeply.

"I love you, Zane," she murmurs, and fuck, I nearly come there and then. There's something so empowering about the way she looks at me when she says it. It's been years since I saw such unwavering emotions in her eyes, and it makes me want to believe in us despite everything.

"Touch yourself for me," I order, and she obeys immediately, moving one hand between us while the other tightens around the back of my neck.

I bite down on my lip to keep from moaning as I watch my wife finger herself, my cock buried deep inside her against the side of her parents' shed. "I'm close," she moans, her voice just a touch too loud.

I capture her mouth and kiss her, silencing every single whimper, until her pussy constricts around me, over and over again. I groan as she makes me come right alongside her, my breathing erratic. "Fuck," I whisper. "You're fucking incredible, Mrs. Windsor."

She chuckles and leans back, both of her arms wrapping around my neck as I lean into her. Her eyes meet mine, and that sweet smile of hers makes my heart skip a beat. "We're going to be okay, aren't we?" she asks, her voice breaking.

I drop my forehead to hers and draw a shaky breath. Yes. Without a doubt, Celeste," I whisper.

Chapter Ninety-Five

CELESTE

I lean back in my desk chair and cross my arms, my eyes narrowed. Zane has been grinning at his phone all morning now, and he's been acting a bit secretive. It doesn't sit well with me, but I'm trying to be patient instead of snapping at him and thinking the worst, like I used to.

It took months, and countless sessions of marriage counseling, for us to unlearn some of our behaviors. But there are still times when I feel myself slip back into old responses, like right now.

"Zane," I snap, rising to my feet. I lean forward and place my palms flat on my desk, fury building inside me. "You're acting weird and I don't like it. What are you hiding from me?"

He looks at me and puts his phone away, his expression so enamored that my shoulders relax in relief. "Celestial," he says, smiling up at me. "I can't tell you, Goddess. It's a surprise."

I study him for a moment, and he grins at me, his gaze filled with unwavering love. When he looks at me like that, all of my doubts fade away. I sigh and sit down, but I'm unable to resist throwing him a hateful little look that just makes him laugh. Zane continues to smirk at his phone as I get back to work, but this time, I don't let it faze me. As the months passed, it became easier to trust him the way I used to, because each time I had any doubts, he let me do what I needed to prove myself wrong, his patience seemingly endless.

“I’m proud of you,” he says suddenly, his voice filled with emotion. “Just a few months ago, you’d have stormed over and demanded to see my phone, and we’d have tried not to argue.”

I look up at him, my heart warming. “I’m proud of you too,” I tell him, meaning every word. Even when we left the island, I wasn’t sure we truly could make it, but we put in the work, and he was right. We weren’t really trying before, not the way we did there, and every day since.

It took Zane weeks not to tense when I asked him intrusive questions about our business, and it wasn’t until a few months ago that he began to give me access to data I could, if I wanted to, use against him. We’ve taken slow steps forward, hand in hand, and while it was an arduous journey, it absolutely was worth it. The happiness we have now surpasses what we had in the past, because this kind? It’s the result of two people coming together despite the odds, despite a history that should’ve torn them apart. It’s us choosing each other, even when times get tough. It’s learning, and never giving up. With it comes a new kind of happiness, and an irrefutable, unmovable kind of love.

Zane sighs happily and shoots me a loving glance before turning back to his phone. I shake my head and try my hardest not to wonder what he’s up to as I focus on our current project, only for my concentration to break when the door opens. Sierra and Raven walk in, making a beeline for me, and I frown in confusion.

Raven is launching a new fashion line soon, and Sierra is in the middle of acquiring a large piece of land for Windsor Real Estate. They’ve been so busy we had to postpone anti-poker night this month, and I can count the number of times we’ve had to do that on one hand.

“Celeste,” Sierra says, her tone aggrieved as she holds her hand up for me. “My nail just broke.” I raise a brow as I take in her snapped nail. It looks oddly perfect, like it was cut manually, without any jagged edges. “It’s been annoying me all morning, and then Raven mentioned she was going to get hers done ahead of her show, so I figured I’d just go with her. We found a new salon we really like, so we thought we’d drag you along with us.”

Raven nods and offers me her hand. “I know you like doing yours yourself, but this salon has really cool nail art. I think you’ll love it.”

I take her hand, and she entwines our fingers. “I have to work,” I tell them, confused. “I can’t just... I can’t just go right now.”

Raven looks over her shoulder and raises a brow at Zane, who instantly smiles back at her. "Don't look at me like that. She's my Co-CEO, she can do what she wants. I don't make my wife's schedule."

Raven nods as she pulls me out of my chair. "All I heard is that you're perfectly capable of making time for us," she says, her hand slipping around my waist.

I sigh as I grab my phone to call my driver, resigned to my fate. When Sierra and Raven want something, there's no getting out of it. "Where are we going?"

Sierra does this giddy little shake that's ridiculously adorable, and I shake my head as Raven pulls me out of the office, equally excited. I'm not sure what's up with them today, but their mood is a little infectious. "So, what's going on?" I ask the moment we enter the elevator.

Sierra looks flustered for a moment, but Raven merely raises a brow. "What do you mean?"

My gaze moves between the two of them, my eyes narrowed. "Did you... did you guys get some good news or something? I feel like you're both a little over-excited today?"

They exchange a look before simultaneously shaking their heads. "Nope," Sierra says. "Just excited to skip work and catch up. I'm all for how obsessed Zane and you are with each other, but it's irritating how very little attention I get these days. It's like you don't even love me ever since you got back from that dumb island Zane won't let me go to."

I bite back a laugh and wrap my arm around Sierra's shoulder. I glance at Raven for support, only to find her looking equally aggrieved. She nods and crosses her arms. "Yeah," she says, her cheeks rosy. "And you've gone to all of Faye's concerts, but you only came to one of my shows. I guess you don't love me anymore either."

Startled laughter escapes my lips, and I shake my head. "Fine. I'm yours for the rest of the day, okay? Will that prove how much I love you both?"

They both grin victoriously, and I realize I just got tricked into skipping work for the rest of the day. "Great," Raven says as she steps out of the elevator. "Because I hand drew you a nail design, and I made appointments at the spa and hairdresser too."

I tilt my head and study her as she walks to my car, where my driver is already waiting for us. She drew a design for me? When? I thought this was an impromptu meet-up?

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Chapter Ninety-Six

CELESTE

I smile at my nails as I walk up to my front door, the design reminiscent of Zane's rose garden with its variety of roses and the coral, red, and pink shades. It's beautifully intricate, and in hindsight, I'm glad I let the girls abduct me. My entire day was simply perfect, right down to the champagne we shared, the massages we had, and the stunning blow-dry I walked away with. I hadn't even realized how wound up I was until they forced me to relax, and that's probably why they did it in the first place, because life has truly been a lot lately — in the very best ways.

I frown when I walk into the house, my gaze dropping to the red roses on the floor. They're placed so they're creating a path, candles in between the flower heads. *Zane*. He did mention he had a surprise, and I suppose this is it, but why? It isn't my birthday.

My heart begins to race, and I can't wipe the grin off my face when I notice little nail polish bottles in between the roses and candles. I pick one up, only to burst out laughing when I realize the beautiful coral shade is called *Celestial*. Did Zane have this custom made for me? What's going on?

I take another step forward, my gaze roaming over the path, my heart skipping a beat with each bottle I pick up. There's a red shade called *Mrs. Windsor*, a peach shade called *Zane's Goddess*, and then there's a deep crimson color called *Zane's Wife*. I frown when I realize why they look so

familiar. These are the shades my nail artist used today, aren't they? They're all the shades of the roses in the garden.

I'm oddly nervous as I enter the observatory and follow the trail down to the rose garden, noting the countless fairy lights everywhere that perfectly complement the starry skies visible through the glass ceiling. This place looks even more magical than usual, and I can't quite figure out why. What is my sweet husband up to tonight?

In the distance, I can hear a faint piano melody, and I follow the sound with a hopeful heart. I pause when I notice Zane standing in the same spot he first kissed me in, a beautiful gazebo now standing where there used to be empty space, roses crawling up its sides. Zane smiles nervously, and I suck in a breath as I take in the tuxedo he's wearing tonight.

I begin to tremble as I walk toward him, and the way he smiles brings tears to my eyes. "Zane?" I whisper.

He reaches for me with a shaking hand and gently pushes my hair out of my face, his gaze searching for a moment, before he slowly lowers himself down to one knee in front of me. I gasp when he pulls out a ring box with the famous Laurier logo on it, my hand covering my lips as pure disbelief crashes through me. *What is happening?* This cannot be real.

Zane smirks at my expression and pops the box open, revealing a stunning diamond ring, its shape reminiscent of a rose. "Oh my God," I whisper, and he chuckles.

"Celeste," he says, his gaze rapidly becoming serious, despite the joyful twinkle in his eyes. "My entire world has revolved around you ever since we were three years old, and you walked into class with those adorable braids of yours. I thought you were an actual princess, but as it turns out, you were an enchantress, because I've been under your spell ever since."

I laugh, and he grins up at me. "You were the reason I became the person I am today, Celeste. All our lives, you challenged me to do better. Through the good and the bad, there was always one constant: *you*. As we grew up together, you were the one who taught me what love really is. I think I first realized I was in love with you when we were fifteen, and Tommy asked you out on a date."

His expression turns stormy then, and I bite back a smile. I can't believe he's still upset about that. He's truly ridiculous, and I love him for it. "I don't think I've ever sabotaged someone that quickly. Within hours, I had his father on the phone, begging me to tell him what they'd done to offend

me. That's what you do to me, you know? You drive me a little crazy, in the very best ways."

I can't help but giggle, the sound so joyful that he smirks back at me. "I knew I couldn't live without you when you left for college, and I found my entire life empty. My nemesis was suddenly gone, and I knew that when you came back, I had to shoot my shot. I still count my lucky stars that you gave me a chance, Celestial. I thought I'd loved you then, but everything that followed showed me what true love really is. You taught me that love isn't always perfect, like I once thought it would be. It's laughter and inside jokes, home-cooked meals and flowers, long conversations and apologies. It's patience and grace, but above all, it's choosing each other, over and over again, even when it isn't an easy choice."

Zane bites down on his lip for a moment, nerves contorting his face. He draws a shaky breath and looks into my eyes. "Celestial, I want it all with you. Everything we missed out on, everything we should've had. I want everything we'd planned on, right down to the cake we chose. If you'll let me, I want to write my own vows, and see you walk down the aisle with a smile on your face. Celeste, will you marry me? Not because you had to, but because you want to?"

I blink back my tears and nod, my heart racing. "Yes," I tell him instantly. "Nothing would make me happier, Zane."

He breathes a sigh of relief as he slides my engagement ring onto my finger, and I smile at him, surprised he's so nervous when we're technically already married.

Zane rises to his feet and smiles at me, his eyes twinkling with pride as he lifts our joined hands to his lips and turns my hand to kiss the inside of my wrist. "I love you," he whispers. "I'm going to make you so happy, Celeste. I can't wait to show you what our engagement and marriage should've been like."

I cup his face, and he drops his forehead to mine. "I love you more, Zane. You already make me so incredibly happy, you know? I don't need any of this. You're all I need, all I'll ever need."

His lips find mine, and he kisses me slowly, deeply, like nothing else matters. Rose petals begin to fall from the sky, and I lean back in his embrace to find our families walking up to us, all of them hurling the petals into the air.

Zane laughs and pulls me closer, his lips brushing against my ear. “When they found out I was going to propose, they all wanted to be part of it, and I couldn’t really say no. Your dad cried when I asked for your hand, and my brothers were all overly emotional when I told them about my plans too. The girls... well, they were something else. Faye insisted on playing the piano during my proposal, Sierra and Raven decided you had to have the perfect hair and nails, and Val sourced and acquired the company that made your custom nail polish.”

I turn in Zane’s embrace as everyone begins to congratulate us, and my eyes settle on Lex’s proud gaze for a moment, before taking in Archer’s identical expression. When I first married Zane, I didn’t think I’d ever find myself here, surrounded by people who love us and who just want us to be happy together. This, right here, is my biggest dream come true. I can’t believe we made it.

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Chapter Ninety-Seven

ZANE

Celeste grins at her ring as I drive us over to Grandma's house, and I can't help but smile too. I don't even have to ask her which color she's wearing today, it's *Zane's Goddess*. "There's something I didn't tell you about your ring."

She looks up and raises a brow inquisitively as I park in front of my grandmother's house. "Oh?"

My heart races as I turn to face her, heat rushing to my cheeks. "I've had it for years. It's the same ring I planned to propose with years ago, and I could never get rid of it. I guess deep down, I'd kinda been hoping it'd eventually still end up on your hand. It's the shape of a rose because I told you the rose garden was always meant for my wife."

She smiles and places her hand on my thigh, her gaze filled with the endless happiness I've been feeling too. When I proposed, I genuinely thought things couldn't get any better, but they did. In the last few weeks, we've only grown closer, and the bond between us feels stronger than it's ever been before.

"I love you," Celeste says, before glancing at her ring. "It's just so perfect. I honestly still can't stop staring at it."

I grab her hand and kiss the inside of her wrist, my heart overflowing with love for her. I can't believe we made it, after all these years. "What do

you think of getting married in the rose garden? It belongs to you now, but perhaps we could open it up to our guests for a day?"

She entwines our fingers and brings our joined hands to her chest, her whole face lighting up. "I would love that!" Her gaze roams over my face then. "Did you know? That I really wanted to get married in the rose garden?"

I shake my head and reach for one of her curls. "No, Celestial, but you and I have always been crazy in-sync, so I figured if I wanted to, you would as well."

She nods and leans into my hand when I cup her face. "I didn't want to ask you, because I know how much the observatory means to you — especially the rose garden. I didn't want you to feel obligated to do something you might not feel comfortable with."

God, I love her. "It's where I kissed you for the very first time, so it feels perfectly... *full circle*. It's also where I made some really special memories with my parents, so it'll be like they're with us too. I can't think of a better place for us."

She nods and leans in to kiss me, her touch leisurely and needy. I sigh against her lips and bury my hand in her hair. "Should we skip dinner?"

Celeste laughs and shakes her head. "We can't. Grandma said she had an announcement we all had to be present for."

I groan when she pulls away and shoots me a chastising look. "*Fine*," I murmur, before getting out of the car and walking around it to open the door for her. She holds my hand as she drags me through the house, only to let go promptly when she sees the girls standing in our formal drawing room.

"You get used to it," Ares tells me, sighing.

"To what?"

Dion moves to stand next to me and shakes his head. "The way our wives abandon us for each other."

Luca nods and crosses his arms, his eyes on his wife. "I literally had to pick Val up from Sierra's house the other day because they'd decided on an impromptu sleepover after too many drinks. I draw the line at any of the girls stealing my wife away from me overnight."

I simply grin as I watch Celeste chat with my family, big smiles on all their faces. "I don't mind," I tell them, meaning every word. We had to fight to get back to where we are now, and I won't ever take it for granted.

Lex walks into the room and nods at us before sauntering over to the girls, his demeanor surprisingly relaxed when we all know what this gathering is going to be about. I watch as he ruffles Celeste's hair and rests his elbow on Faye's shoulder, earning himself hateful glances from both and a reprimand from Raven. Sierra stamps on his shoe, and he stumbles back. Moron. At least he's learned not to mess with Val.

He tenses slightly when Grandma walks into the room, and as if on cue, Celeste walks over to me as the other girls find their husbands, all of us standing together like little united fronts, with Sierra and Lex in the middle.

"Kids," Grandma says, her stern gaze roaming over Ares first, then Luca, Dion, and finally pausing on me. Her deep pink suit doesn't even remotely make her look any less terrifying when she looks at us like that, and even Celeste tenses a little. I wrap my hand around her waist and pull her a little closer.

"I'm sure you can guess why I've gathered you all here." Grandma looks at Lex then, a deceptively sweet smile on her face. "*Lexington*." His shoulders tense, but his expression remains perfectly unreadable. "All four of your brothers are happily married, and all four have committed to unions that have greatly benefited our family. We are exceptionally lucky to have Raven, Val, Faye, and Celeste, and I know I speak for all of us when I say with each addition, the love between us just grows."

We all nod, unable to refute her words, and I tighten my grip on my wife when Grandma pins Lex down with a pointed stare. "Now it's your turn, Lexington. Your engagement has been decided."

I watch him bite back a smile. "Enlighten me," he says, his tone indulgent. "Who am I marrying?"

Grandma looks slightly thrown off, and Celeste throws me a questioning look. I just shake my head, indicating that I'll tell her later.

"Raya Lewis."

Lex grins then, earning himself a confused stare from Grandma. "Interesting," he says, nodding. "The Lewises are tech giants, so it's an excellent choice."

Grandma raises a brow. "Raya is currently an engineering student at Astor College. Her family is not opposed to her getting married prior to graduating, but Raya has requested her marriage be kept a secret from the press, so she's able to complete her education in peace."

Lex crosses his arms, a wicked smile on his face. “What a coincidence,” he says. “I just agreed to teach an engineering class at Astor College next semester.”

It takes all of me to keep from laughing at my grandmother’s expression. She clearly expected Lex to be reluctant, and nothing about this situation is as she thought it would be. She should’ve known, though. Lex has always been our troublemaker.

“We’ve set the wedding date one month from now. Since we agreed to their request for secrecy, we felt there was no need to delay the paperwork. The two of you can simply have your ceremony once Raya graduates.”

Lex merely nods, and Celeste raises a brow. “What is going on?” she whispers.

I position myself behind her, my lips brushing against her ear. “He had one of his friends hack grandma’s systems and found out who he was marrying long before this announcement. Lex then tracked her down at a party, and I’m not entirely sure what happened there, but shortly after, he signed on to teach at her college. I have this sinking feeling he never told her who he was when they met.”

Celeste lets her head fall back against my shoulder and laughs, drawing the attention of everyone else in the room. I press a kiss to her temple before letting go of her, unable to push aside my own amusement. Raya has no idea what she’s getting herself into, but if she managed to get Lex’s attention at all, she probably is someone who can handle him. Behind his often eccentric charade, he has the kindest soul, and I just hope Raya will be able to see and appreciate that.

If he’s as lucky as the rest of us have been, he’s about to find out what real happiness is — the kind I know he’s been missing since our parents died. I smile to myself and grab my wife’s hand, quietly excited to see my youngest brother meet his match.

Epilogue

ZANE

I smile to myself as I place more meat on our grill in the observatory. It's a recent addition that Celeste wanted for the monthly family lunches we've started doing again, and I wasn't too sure how I felt about it at first, only to find out that my wife was right. It's brilliant, and I love using it.

Laughter rings through the air, filling up the garden with pure joy, despite the rain that's hammering against our glass ceiling. Sometimes I look around, and it hits me. We made it, and this is real happiness. It seems a little surreal every once in a while, especially when my beautiful wife looks at me the way she does right now.

"That's my sister, asshole," Archer says, knocking his shoulder against mine playfully.

I shrug and smirk at him. "Can't help it. That's my wife."

"*Disgusting*," Lex says as he walks past us with his own wife, Raya. He turns to her and grins. "I'll never be like that."

She merely raises a brow. "Lex, you literally call me your *wife* every chance you get. You've nearly gotten us caught a few times now."

I can't quite make sense of them, but one thing is for sure — Lexington met his match. Raya is fiery and strong-minded, and she's exactly what Lex needs. Or she could be if she actually gave him a chance. I'm not too sure what's going on between the two of them, but I can tell they don't have what Celeste and I have. Not yet.

Archer chuckles next to me, and I glance over to find him on his phone. He's barely put it away since he got here. "Are you going to tell me who she is?"

His gaze snaps to mine, and his smile melts away. "What do you mean?"

I shake my head and turn the meat. "Is it Serenity?"

His lips part in shock, and I can't help but laugh at his incredulous expression. "How did you know?"

I glance back at my wife and grin. She looks so beautiful in that red dress and her *Zane's Wife* nails. I've recently created even more shades for her, and every time I give her a new one, it just makes her smile in a way that brings me an insane joy.

"Celeste told me she opened your door wearing a t-shirt Raven designed the last time she came to see you." I glance at him and shake my head. "It was a limited edition t-shirt that Celeste bought for you. Women notice that kind of thing, man. If you wanted to keep it a secret, you should've been more careful."

Archer cups the back of his neck and shoots his sister a worried glance before looking down. "It's not like that."

I raise a brow.

"Okay, fine. It *is* like that, but it shouldn't be. She's... well, she's my business partner's younger half-sister. She's a decade younger than me, and I absolutely shouldn't be... ugh, fuck." He rubs his face and looks up at the rainy sky. "I keep telling myself I'll stop. It was never meant to be serious, Zane. I was just helping her with something, and it was never meant to be more than a favor."

I begin to place the food on plates and throw him an incredulous look. "Right, so you're fucking your business partner's sister as a *favor*. What the fuck, Arch?"

He buries his hands in his hair and nods. "Literally. I'm not even joking, Zane. She's made a list."

"What kind of list?"

He looks into my eyes, completely flustered. I've never seen him lose his composure like that. "She made a list of people she considered asking... she, uh... she..."

"Fucking hell. What could she possibly have asked you that has you stammering like that?"

His eyes fall closed, and he sighs. “She made a list of people she considered losing her virginity to, and she put me on it.”

“What?”

He nods, his face contorting in torment. “Yep. I know I need to break it off, but I keep thinking of her doing everything I’ve taught her with someone else, and I just... *fuck*. The idea makes me sick. I should’ve just walked away when I saw that damn list.”

I shake my head as I study him, realizing he’s fucking smitten. “It’s not too late to do that,” I say, shrugging. I know he won’t — I can tell by the look in his eyes, but it’s fun to mess with Archer. He’s teased me endlessly about how in love I am with Celeste, and it’s about time I get to make him understand how fucking annoying it is.

“Zane?” Celeste calls as she walks up to me. Archer steps away to make space for his sister, and I instantly wrap my arm around her waist. She rises to her tiptoes to kiss me, making her brother turn and walk away in disgust. “Did he tell you?” she asks, her expression eager.

I laugh and pull her closer, my hands wrapping around her waist. “Why are you so nosy, Celestial?”

She pouts, and I lean in to kiss her again. “I just wanna know,” she says. “He won’t tell me anything about her, but it’s so obvious he’s in love. You’re one of his best friends, so even if he won’t tell me, he’ll tell you.”

I take her bottom lip in between my teeth and bite down softly. “So you want me to betray one of my closest friends for you?”

She leans back in my embrace and nods. “Of course.”

I burst out laughing and press a kiss to her forehead before telling her everything Archer just told me. I can’t keep a secret from her, and everyone knows it. She gasps in outrage, her eyes twinkling with mirth.

“You’re so beautiful,” I whisper, the thought leaving my lips subconsciously. “Do you have any idea how lucky I feel? It’s insane that I get to call you my wife.”

She laughs and shakes her head. “No, Zane. If anyone is lucky, it’s me.”

The craziest thing of all is she seems to genuinely believe it, and she tries to prove it to me each and every day.

Ten Years Later

ZANE

“How could you possibly still be nervous?” Lex asks. “You marry the same woman every single year, and you’re still acting like she might not show up. It’s been *ten years*.”

I shift my weight and straighten my bowtie as I stare at the floral aisle we crafted on the beach on our private island. It’s rapidly become one of our favorite places to come when we want to be alone and focus on nothing but each other. “You don’t understand,” I tell him, shaking my head. “Every day, she has a choice, and every day, I’m grateful she chooses me. I won’t ever take that for granted.”

Dion sighs and throws me a smile. “Just let him be. We all have our little quirks.” I grin at him, understanding passing between us. Dion learned to fly a plane, despite his intense fear of flying, so he could take Faye to a different honeymoon destination every year — he gets it.

Marriage takes constant work, and the little things matter as much as the big things. It’s facing your fears and giving someone the power to destroy you, but trusting that they won’t. *Trust*. It’s something we took for granted until we lost it, and it took us years to rebuild it, but rebuild it we did. I’ve never felt more loved than I do with my wife, and the bond between us has never been stronger. She’s my partner in crime, my better half, and I don’t ever want her to feel like I take her for granted. It’s so easy to get caught up

in life, to forget what matters most — and that’s exactly why we renew our vows every year.

Faye begins to play the piano, and I suck in a breath when the most beautiful girl in the world walks down the aisle, her pretty updo unable to contain all of her wild curls. My beautiful little Calista gets that from her mother. My daughter grins at me, and my heart skips a beat. She’s so gorgeous, my little baby, in her dress that no doubt matches her mother’s. Callie throws her rose petals around with such joy, and my heart warms. She’s got my green thumb, and our favorite activity is gardening together in her mom’s rose garden. Just the other week, I showed her how to create roses with colored edges using food coloring, and she was so enchanted. Celeste says I spoil her, but I don’t think that’s true.

“Daddy,” she says, her hazel eyes twinkling — her eye color is a perfect blend of Celeste’s and mine, but her smile, that’s all me. I lean down to lift her into my arms, and she giggles. “*Daddy*,” she chastises. “You know the rules. I have to stand next to Uncle Lex.”

“But princess, you’re so beautiful today, I’m not sure I can let you go.”

She laughs and wraps her little arms around my neck, hugging me tightly. I thought I couldn’t be any happier than Celeste and I were after our second wedding ceremony — but then Calista came into the world, and I realized there was so much more love left in me. I’m not sure what I’ve done to earn as much happiness as I have in my life, but I thank my lucky stars every single day.

Ares takes Callie from me, and she goes willingly, instantly creating a huge argument between all her uncles, who all want to carry her. I glance over my shoulder to find that Lex won, his gaze victorious. Callie told me not to tell anyone, but he’s secretly her favorite because he’s always handmade cool toys for her. Just the other day, Raya and Lex rocked up with a tiny excavator for her to ride in and dig shit up in the observatory. It was a nightmare, and I had to create some ground rules quickly before Celeste found out about all the damage.

Everyone falls silent, and I inhale sharply when my wife appears on her father’s arm, wearing one of Raven’s stunning creations. The press has a field day with our vow renewals. It’s become a game of sorts to guess what Celeste might wear each year, and after the photos inevitably leak, the dress sells out within seconds.

Celeste smiles at me when George places her hand in mine, and I grin back at her, my heart racing. It's crazy how in love I still am with her. Every year, I fall a little harder. There's something so beautiful about sharing your life with someone — about growing together and discovering new parts of each other in every stage of life. I love who she is as a businesswoman, a wife, and a mother. Neither of us is perfect, but fuck, together? This is as close to perfection as anyone can get. I just know it.

My stunning goddess squeezes my hand, and I lose myself in her eyes. She's my best friend and the love of my life. Knowing that she loves me the same is so fucking surreal.

"Celeste," I murmur. "On our ten-year anniversary, I have ten vows for you."

Her eyes widen, and I know right there and then that she'd had the same idea. We're still so perfectly in-sync, it's crazy. She chuckles, and I wrap my arms around her waist, my heart overflowing with love.

"I vow to love you a little more each day, to appreciate you, and to honor you always. I vow to be faithful, and to be your partner as we navigate our ever-changing life. I promise to take your side and stand by you, to uplift you. I promise to be there when you need me, even if you don't want me to be, and to push you to be the best you can be. But above all, Celeste, I vow to be yours, forever and always."

Her gaze is filled with such love, and it's a beautiful sight. "You stole my idea," she says, laughing as she cups my cheek. "I, too, vow to love you forever and always, Zane. I vow to respect and honor you, to be faithful and appreciate you, to make you laugh, and to nurture our relationship. I vow to be your best friend, and to never stop challenging you, but above all, I promise to put you first, and to choose you every single day, even when you make it difficult by spoiling our daughter rotten." She narrows her eyes then. "I know about the excavator, Zane."

My eyes widen, and she bursts out laughing. I can't help but follow suit, my heart filled to the brim with pure happiness. "God, I love you," I whisper, moments before we're pronounced husband and wife all over again.

"I love you more," she whispers as she rises to her tiptoes, her lips finding mine. I sigh against her mouth and kiss her deeply, desire rushing through me when she steals away the peppermint candy I'd been sucking

on. When she pulls back to look at me, that same desire pools in her eyes, and I grin, just completely overcome with devotion.

“Disgusting,” Lex mutters, and I glance over to find him covering our daughter’s eyes. Celeste shakes her head as we turn toward our guests, and my hand wraps around her waist. She leans into me as everyone rises from their seats and rushes toward us to congratulate us.

It’s such a blessing how genuinely happy our family is for us, and how happy we all are collectively. “Congratulations,” Sierra says, enveloping my wife in a tight hug. Celeste rests her head on Sierra’s shoulder, Mom’s hairpin sticking out from her bun. Each year, Sierra lends it to her, and each year, Celeste returns it along with a box of cookies Grandma taught her to make. It’s the only thing she can actually make flawlessly, even after years of cooking lessons from my mother-in-law.

I glance at Sierra’s husband, who shakes his head at both women. “How are they this emotional every single year?” he asks, crossing his arms in annoyance as he watches our wives hug a little too tightly for his liking.

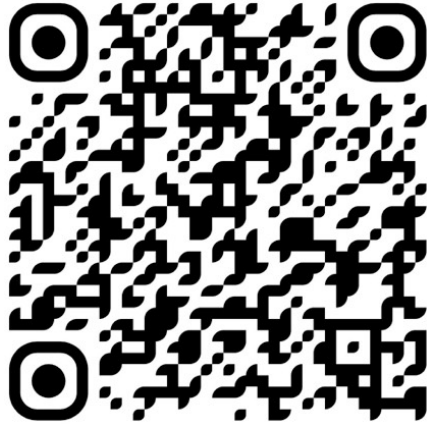
Sierra glares at him from over Celeste’s shoulder. “Just remember, Xavier, I loved her long before I loved *you*.”

He reaches for her and pulls her away from Celeste and into his arms. “Just remember, Mrs. Kingston,” he says. “No one will ever love you as much as I do.”

Celeste laughs as she walks up to me, and I grin back at her. We made it. Despite the odds. Despite the heartache and pain, we made it.

[Lex’s story is coming in January! Pre-order to ensure it’s delivered straight to your kindle on release day.](#)

Want more of Zane and Celeste? Newsletter subscribers get exclusive access to bonus content and deleted scenes, including a scene from prom night, the conversation between Zane and Celeste’s grandparents that led to their marriage, and more. You can download these extra scenes on catharinamaura.com/bonuses or by scanning the following QR code:



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Trigger warnings

Please be advised that this list contains major spoilers for *The Broken Vows* that could ruin your enjoyment of the story as it's meant to be experienced.

Themes and topics in this book include, but are not limited to, the following:

- negative portrayal of borderline personality disorder paired with erotomania
- suicide as a result of a mental health condition
- parental loss and resulting trauma
- mentions of childhood bullying
- unfaithfulness/cheating (despite there being no cheating between the two main characters).

This is a conventional romance and as such, it has a happy ending — however, if any of the above themes are triggers for you, the author *strongly* advises against reading this book.

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