



The

TEMPORARY
WIFE

3 years.

3 miles.

1. Do not fall in love
2. Have a bed every night
3. Keep it a secret at work

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

CATHARINA MAURA

The Temporary Wife

THE WINDSORS

BOOK TWO

CATHARINA MAURA

Copyright © 2023 by Catharina Maura

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

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

Contents

[Chapter 1](#)
[Chapter 2](#)
[Chapter 3](#)
[Chapter 4](#)
[Chapter 5](#)
[Chapter 6](#)
[Chapter 7](#)
[Chapter 8](#)
[Chapter 9](#)
[Chapter 10](#)
[Chapter 11](#)
[Chapter 12](#)
[Chapter 13](#)
[Chapter 14](#)
[Chapter 15](#)
[Chapter 16](#)
[Chapter 17](#)
[Chapter 18](#)
[Chapter 19](#)
[Chapter 20](#)
[Chapter 21](#)
[Chapter 22](#)
[Chapter 23](#)
[Chapter 24](#)
[Chapter 25](#)
[Chapter 26](#)
[Chapter 27](#)
[Chapter 28](#)
[Chapter 29](#)
[Chapter 30](#)
[Chapter 31](#)
[Chapter 32](#)
[Chapter 33](#)
[Chapter 34](#)
[Chapter 35](#)
[Chapter 36](#)
[Chapter 37](#)
[Chapter 38](#)
[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Chapter 43](#)

[Chapter 44](#)

[Chapter 45](#)

[Chapter 46](#)

[Chapter 47](#)

[Chapter 48](#)

[Chapter 49](#)

[Chapter 50](#)

[Chapter 51](#)

[Chapter 52](#)

[Chapter 53](#)

[Chapter 54](#)

[Chapter 55](#)

[Chapter 56](#)

[Chapter 57](#)

[Chapter 58](#)

[Chapter 59](#)

[Chapter 60](#)

[Chapter 61](#)

[Chapter 62](#)

[Chapter 63](#)

[Chapter 64](#)

[Chapter 65](#)

[Chapter 66](#)

[Chapter 67](#)

[Chapter 68](#)

[Chapter 69](#)

[Chapter 70](#)

[Chapter 71](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Epilogue: 10 Years Later](#)

Chapter One

LUCA

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

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

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

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

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

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

My executive secretary, Valentina, walks in right at that moment, her

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He nods vehemently, the gaze that is meant to look reassuring reeking

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

His face pales. "Luca, if you do that, we... we'd go bankrupt."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Valentina nods, not even a hint of protest in her eyes. For years, she’s worked the same sixteen-hour days I have. Initially, I only made her work these insane hours in an effort to make her quit, but it’s become our usual routine.

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

Chapter Two

LUCA

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Interesting," she says, staring at her phone as she sits down on the

sofa. I take a seat and lean in to look over her shoulder, a whiff of her signature lavender scent involuntarily making me breathe in deeper. “He asked his son to step down. I’m surprised.”

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

“Why, what?” Her voice trembles.

“Why are you surprised?”

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

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

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

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

Valentina looks down, shielding her expression from me. “I see,” she says, her tone devoid of emotion. For a split second, I worried she’d ask me about my parents, but I should’ve known better. Valentina never intrudes. I used to think it was because she was scared she’d lose her job if she did, but I’ve come to suspect that it’s because she genuinely doesn’t care. She truly is made of ice.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

They're all industries the Windsors have entered in the last fifty years, under my grandmother's guidance. We've been tremendously successful, but it's the Finance industry we entered first. It's Windsor Finance, and The Windsor Bank, that we're best known for.

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

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

When did it all change? I hated her when Grandma hired her and

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

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

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

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

Chapter Three

VALENTINA

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

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

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

I stare at her, admiring her grit even as despair seeps in. I would be the last person to ever deny how much she’s been through, but she fails to see how much damage *she’s* doing — to herself and everyone around her. “Is

that what I am to you, Mom? A broken piece? A reminder of the past?" The words I'd normally keep buried deep within roll off my tongue before I have a chance to swallow them down.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mom nods and smiles at me, genuinely this time. "I'm proud of you," she says, her voice soft. "I always knew you'd make it far. You inherited my intelligence, after all. You've had opportunities I could only dream of when I was your age."

I look away and try to push down the tinge of resentment I feel. Just once, I'd love for her to acknowledge my success without making it all

about her. I love my mother beyond words, but she was never there when I was growing up. Unlike what she seems to believe, she wasn't the one who raised me. That was all Abuela.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Val? Are you leaving?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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