



The
UNWANTED
MARRIAGE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

CATHARINA MAURA

The Unwanted Marriage

DION & FAYE'S STORY

THE WINDSORS

BOOK THREE

CATHARINA MAURA

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

Trigger Warning

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

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

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Chapter One

Dion

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

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

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

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

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

Arranged marriages are a Windsor tradition, and I've known for years that this day would come. Out of all my siblings, I'm the only one who's been engaged for years, the only one who's known who I'd marry for over a decade now. That never made it easier. No — if anything, it's felt like a slow walk toward the gallows, until, at last, my fate is sealed.

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

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

"Dion?" my grandmother says, cutting through the haze. My eyes snap up, and I realize the room has fallen silent. "Need I remind you of our

agreement? It's time to stop avoiding Faye."

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

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

It'll never be enough.

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

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

My fingers gently brush over the hidden compartment in the wall, and I push against one of the bricks, exposing a spare key. Our childhood home is the only building on our estate that we never upgraded with the new tech we installed everywhere else. Though we never discussed it, my siblings and I came to a silent agreement to leave it untouched. Perhaps we all simply wanted to preserve what's left of our parents, or maybe none of us are quite ready to let go. I'm not sure we ever will be.

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

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

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

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

would've changed.

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

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

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

I sit down on my mother's piano bench, the sheet music untouched. *La Campanella*. Her favorite. She didn't even need to read the notes to play it — the sheet music was for me. It's the last piece she tried teaching me, and one of the few I never had the heart to master. Not truly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"It wasn't your fault, Dion," she lies.

"I can't do this to her. Not her."

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

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

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

Chapter Two

Faye

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

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

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

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

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

I'm equal parts glad and fearful that my two younger step-sisters haven't had to learn how to adjust their behavior to our father. It means there's still hope for them, that their spirits aren't quite broken just yet — but it also means his actions hurt them more than they do me. I've become used to it now, but I hope they'll never have to. Not much longer now. Just a few more months, and things will finally get better.

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

"Yes, Father?"

"When do you leave for college?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

his devotion.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Need I remind you of what's at stake?" he whispers, his gaze

burning with hatred. The Windsors promised him two million for each year I remain married to Dion, up to six million in total, and Father never lets me forget it.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You should arrange to see Dion soon," Abigail says, her voice soft.

She doesn't even bother checking up on me. Perhaps she's just gotten used to this, or maybe she simply doesn't care about my wellbeing. More and more, I'm starting to wonder if it might be the latter.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter Three

Faye

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

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

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

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

Yet somehow, right here, right now, I want to pretend. This entire charade will come to an end the moment I break up with Eric, but for a few more hours, I want to keep pretending that I truly am everything he thinks I am.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Eric pulls my chair out for me and shoots me a worried look, but thankfully, he doesn’t say anything. I’m not sure I could explain myself if I tried — not without ruining everything.

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

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

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

“You like fish, don’t you?” he asks, pointing to a really overpriced

dish on the menu. He'll undoubtedly want to pay, and I can't let him treat me to something like that, not when I know I'll never get to repay him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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