



The  
WRONG  
BRIDE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

CATHARINA MAURA

*The Wrong Bride*

ARES & RAVEN'S STORY

CATHARINA MAURA

*This one is for everyone who's ever been made to feel like they don't measure up. You don't need to fit into the boxes others built for you.*

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# Chapter One

RAVEN

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“I can’t believe that asshole,” Sierra says as she storms into my office. I drop my pencil to my desk and reluctantly drag my eyes away from the evening gown I’m designing.

After a couple of tough weeks, I woke up this morning with my creative block completely gone. I knew exactly what to design for my upcoming fashion line, but with my best friend here, there’s no way I’m going to get this dress out of my mind and onto paper.

“Morning, babe,” I tell Sierra, suppressing a smile. There’s only one person she gets this riled up over, and I have no doubt whatever story she’s about to tell me is going to be *wild*.

“Xavier Kingston stole my concept and presented it as his own. He won the project I spent *months* preparing for — *with my ideas!*”

I lean back in my seat and let my gaze roam over Sierra’s disheveled, long, wavy brown hair. My bestie always looks impeccable, but not today. Looks like Xavier really got to her this time.

“Weren’t you the one who sabotaged him last time? You punctured his tires so he’d be late to the meeting when you knew that tardiness was the one thing the client wouldn’t tolerate.”

Sierra smirks wickedly, her green eyes lit up with delight at the memory. “If not for that, his company might actually have gotten that resort deal.

That was a multi-million dollar deal. Honestly, I'm kind of disappointed it was so easy to mess with him. Usually he's smarter than that."

I shake my head and lean in, giving her my full attention. She won't leave until she's had enough time to complain about Xavier Kingston, her biggest rival. King Enterprises and Windsor Real Estate have been business rivals for as long as I can remember, but Xavier and Sierra definitely took it to the next level.

"So shouldn't you have expected him to retaliate?"

Sierra glares at me as though I've betrayed her, but she knows I'm right. Honestly, even though they keep sabotaging each other, they both pretty much end up with an equal half of the opportunities that come their way, dominating the real estate industry together.

"I want revenge," she snaps. "That *bastard*. I can't believe him. You *have to* help me, Raven."

I pick my pencil back up and shake my head. "Nope. Not going there." I'm not crazy enough to offend a psychotic billionaire like Xavier Kingston. Sierra is the only woman alive who continuously gets away with that, and I doubt she even realizes that the only reason that happens is because he *lets* her.

My phone buzzes and I reach for it absentmindedly, freezing when I read the caller ID. *Ares*. My heart tightens as I stare at my phone, watching it ring.

"Raven?" Sierra says, her voice soft, concerned.

I look up, snapping out of my daze, and force a smile onto my face. How long have I been zoning out for? "It's your brother," I tell her, before accepting the call.

"Hi, Ares," I say, my calm tone in contrast with the beating of my heart.

He chuckles, and a sharp sense of longing rushes through me. "Raven, I'm surprised you even picked up. You're so hard to reach these days. You're even busier than I am."

I lean back in my seat and smile. It's been a while since I last heard him say my name. "What's up?" I ask, knowing that whatever it is he's calling for is bound to hurt me. Ares is a habit I can't kick. He's a shameful addiction, an illicit secret.

"Want to go shopping with me? I need to buy a present for Hannah's birthday, and who better to ask for help than you?"

I should say no. The *last* thing I want to do is accompany Ares to buy a present for my sister. I can't stand hearing him talk about her, seeing the love and devotion in his eyes. But I'd rather see him gushing over her than not see him at all.

"Sure," I tell him, against better judgement.

Sierra looks at me through narrowed eyes as I end the call. "What did he want?" she snaps.

I smile tightly, knowing she won't be happy. "He needs a birthday present for Hannah."

Sierra locks her jaw and looks away. "Don't go," she says, her voice soft. "Just don't go, Rave. He can figure out what to buy her himself. Why does he need *your* help?"

"It's fine," I tell her, even though I'm not sure it is. It's been years, and I still can't deny him anything.

"It isn't," Sierra says. "I love my brother, but I love you just as much. You need to stop giving him such easy access to you when each and every time you see Ares, you're left heartbroken."

I shake my head in denial. "I'm not, Sierra. Ares and I are just friends. We always have been. You're seeing things that aren't there."

She crosses her arms and stares me down. "Lie to yourself all you want, Rave, but you're not fooling me."

I avert my gaze, unable to keep up my pretence when she's looking at me that way. She's the only one who knows what happened when we were younger, and though I deny it, she's the only one who knows that I'm still as in love with Ares Windsor as I was then.

"Rave, don't you ever wonder what would have happened if you'd confessed your feelings to him after that night—"

I hold my hand up and shake my head. "It wouldn't have mattered. It's always been Hannah he loved. From the moment she walked into his life, she's been all he could see. If I'd told him how I felt about him, it'd just have made things awkward between us. I'd have lost his friendship."

She looks into my eyes, her gaze filled with the same heartache I'm feeling. "Are you really going to stand back and watch Ares marry your sister?"

I turn to face the window and inhale shakily. "What choice do I have? They've been together for five years, Sierra. If there was ever a time to make a move, I missed it. They're happy together, and I wish them well. If



either of them finds out about my feelings, it'd cost me my friendship with Ares, and it'd destroy the strained relationship I have with my sister. And what for? He's never seen me as more than a friend, at best. He never will."

Sierra shakes her head. "I don't know about that, you know? I don't think Ares is as happy as he convinces himself he is, and I sincerely doubt he sees you as just a friend, Rave. He might not be able to admit it to himself, but there's always been something between you two. It was there before Hannah was ever even in the picture, and she was never able to fully erase it. She may have tried, but she's never been able to take your place in his life."

I look down at my hands, unsure what to say. I hate it when she gives me hope that I have no business having. He's about to become my brother-in-law, and I need to keep the boundaries between us firmly intact if I want to survive their wedding.

"Raven, I'm convinced that the only reason they're still together is because they know they have no other choice. Just like me, Ares knows he has to marry someone of our Grandma's choosing... but the one she initially chose for him wasn't Hannah. It was *you*."

My heart aches at the reminder. I still remember the day my parents told me they wanted to retire and decided to merge their independent movie production company, Dreamessence, with Windsor Media. The Windsors and the Du Ponts had been business rivals right until that point, but the proposed merger changed everything — and not just for my parents.

They wanted to keep their beloved company in the family, and since the Windsors are well-known for arranging marriages for their heirs, they were handed the perfect solution. A marriage between the Windsors and the Du Ponts would keep the company in the family, and it'd keep both families in control of the business.

At the time, the one they considered for this arrangement wasn't Hannah. It was me. Due to my friendship with Sierra, they thought I'd be the best fit. I was only twenty when the deal was made, but I'd been happy, and Ares didn't seem opposed to it either.

That all changed when I took Hannah with me to Sierra's twenty-first birthday party. I remember that night vividly. I saw him first, but she's the one he never looked away from.

## Chapter Two

RAVEN

---

My heart skips a beat when I see Ares leaning against his car as he waits for me in front of my office building.

I pause for a moment and take him in. His dark hair, that sharp jaw, those green eyes that are identical to Sierra's. It isn't fair that he continues to get more handsome the older we get. Each time I see him, he feels a little more out of reach. Ares looks up and straightens when he notices me standing by the entrance, a smile transforming his face.

"Hi!" I tell him as he holds the door open for me. Ares grins at me, and I smile back at him. There's a good chance I'll regret giving into him later, but until then, I'm going to enjoy every second of it.

"Where are we going?" I ask when he gets in beside me, his hands wrapping around the steering wheel.

Ares leans back against the headrest and tilts his face toward me. "*Raven*," he says, sounding petulant. I can't help the way my heart races when he says my name like that, and I involuntarily turn toward him, facing him. "Why don't I ever see you anymore?"

Ares genuinely looks distraught, as though he really has missed me, and that fire I keep trying to douse reignites once more.

"I've just been busy." My voice is weak, soft, as though I can't make myself lie to him with authority. "I'm working really insane hours. I've got

so many modeling contracts, and I'm trying to grow my fashion brand at the same time. Honestly, some days I barely have time to eat or sleep."

He nods and drags his gaze away, a hint of concern in his expression as he starts the car. "Don't overwork yourself, Rave. Remember to take care of yourself, okay? You can't always be working. You need to have a social life too. When was the last time you saw your parents?"

I force a smile onto my face and cross my arms. The older I get, the less I see my parents. Their entire world revolves around Hannah, and I hate going where I'm not welcome. I shouldn't feel excluded in my own home, but I do. "Sierra was actually just in my office," I tell him. "I do have friends, you know."

He glances at me the way he does sometimes, as though he can see straight through my lies and deception, but he nods nonetheless.

"What are you thinking of buying this year?" I ask him, my tone light and friendly.

He glances back at me with a smile on his face. "What do you think of some jewelry, maybe?"

I nod. "A new statement piece, perhaps?"

Ares looks at me with such a blank expression that I burst out laughing, and that just makes him smile in return. "I haven't heard you laugh in so long, Raven. I missed it."

My smile melts away and I look down at my lap, my heart aching. I wish he wouldn't say things like that. He sees me as an old friend and his future sister-in-law, but when he tells me he missed me, it becomes hard to remember that. I tighten my grip on my handbag and inhale deeply. "A statement piece is basically just the opposite of a dainty piece of jewelry."

Ares grins at me. "How about I just let you pick?"

I throw a pointed look his way. "Like you do every year?"

He smirks at me as he parks at one of the Windsor malls, pretty much jumping out of the car to rush around it so he can open the door for me. He offers me his hand, and I take it as I step out of his car, my eyes on his.

A flash of light startles both of us, and I turn to my side to find a paparazzo that has been trailing me lately smirking at me. I grit my teeth and take a step toward him, but he takes off running before I can even say a word.

Ares places his hand on the small of my back, and I look up at him. "I should've known taking you to such a public place would've resulted in

this. I'm sorry, Raven. I'll handle it. That picture will never see the light of day."

I shake my head and take a step toward the mall. "It's fine. I'm used to this. I can't stop living my life just because I know I could be photographed at any time. It used to scare me, you know? Public opinion. Now it's just an inconvenience that I've accepted as part of my job."

Ares is quiet as we walk into the mall together. "Maybe I should get you some bodyguards." His tone carries a hint of anger, and I look up in surprise.

"Absolutely not. I'm never in any danger, Ares. I already don't have as much privacy as I wish I had. The last thing I need is someone in my personal space at all times."

He looks at me as though he wants to argue with me, but thankfully he remains quiet as we walk into one of Hannah's favorite jewelry stores.

The store manager tenses and rushes over as soon as he spots Ares, a nervous smile on his face. He's an older man, and his graying hair looks charming on him. If not for his obvious nerves, he'd exude the kind of elegance that suits this store. "Mr. Windsor," he says, before turning toward me with wide eyes. "*Raven.*" His eyes roam over my body the way men's eyes always do. It used to disgust me, knowing they were likely thinking about one of my lingerie campaigns, but I've gotten used to it now. "Raven, wow. It's such an honor to meet you. My name is Andy, and I'll be assisting you today."

Ares tenses and wraps his hand around my shoulder. I glance up at him in surprise, only to find him looking at the store manager with barely concealed annoyance. "We'll ask for your assistance when we need it," he says, his tone harsh.

He pulls me toward the glass display counters, his body tense. "What's wrong?" I ask the moment we're out of earshot.

Ares pulls his hand away and shakes his head. "He's unprofessional. The way he looked at you just now? What was that? First, we get photographed the second we step out of the car, and now *this*?"

A soft chuckle escapes my lips as I lean back against the counter and look up at him. "Ares," I murmur. "I'm not the little girl you used to know anymore. I was named this year's highest paid model, and I'm a brand ambassador for many of the products sold in this mall. It's not surprising

that he'd recognize me. If anything, his response was really quite mild. I'm pretty sure my face is on a large banner advertising this mall."

"Mild?" Ares snaps. "*Mild?* He practically leered at you."

I wrap my hand around his upper arm and smile up at him. "How do you deal with being around Hannah? I might be well known, but I'm pretty sure Hannah is even more famous. Models generally aren't as popular as A-list actresses. How do you deal with the attention she gets if *this* annoys you?"

Ares sighs and runs a hand through his hair. "I think you underestimate your popularity. Besides, your sister has bodyguards around at all times, so I don't need to worry about her. You, on the other hand? You're a stubborn one."

I huff and turn back around to check out the jewelry on display, my eyes trailing over the engagement rings. The mere thought of me ever getting engaged seems so inconceivable. I can't imagine ever wanting to marry anyone other than Ares. There's one ring that catches my eye, and for a single moment I let myself imagine what it'd look like on my finger.

I sigh and pull Ares toward the section where the necklaces are displayed, my gaze settling on a diamond choker necklace. "How about something like that?"

Ares calls Andy over, and he hands the necklace to me before pointing to the mirror behind me. I hold the choker up against my neck, wanting to check what it'll look like, and Ares gently lifts my hair for me, wrapping it over my shoulder and out of the way.

"Try it on," he tells me.

I shake my head. "Oh no, I can't. This is for Hannah. I can tell she'd love it without trying it on."

Ares shakes his head and reaches around me, putting the necklace on me. The way his fingers graze over my skin sends a shiver running down my spine, and he doesn't even realize it.

"If you like it, I'll buy it for you, Raven. We can find something else for Hannah."

My eyes widen, and he smiles at me through the mirror. "Your birthday is coming up soon as well, remember?"

"It's too much," I tell him, my fingers curling around the clasp at the back. "But thank you. She'll love it. You should definitely buy her this."

Ares nods and takes the necklace from me, his gaze lingering on my face. “Hey,” he says, his voice soft. “Are we okay, Rave? I feel like you’ve been avoiding me lately, you know? Is it the pressure Hannah has put on you with the wedding? I know you’ve been doing a lot of the prep that she was supposed to do. Just tell me if it’s too much, okay? You know I hate it when you suddenly go quiet.”

I wrap my hand around his arm and smile at him. “We’re fine, Ares. I’ve just been really busy, that’s all.”

His expression tells me that he knows I’m lying, but thankfully he lets it go. How do I tell him that the mere thought of him marrying Hannah makes everything feel so final? I’m truly losing him now, every last bit of hope going up in smoke. How do I tell him that my heart is breaking in a way it never has before, and I’m not sure the pieces can ever be recovered?