



The
WRONG
BRIDE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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The Wrong Bride
ARES & RAVEN'S STORY

CATHARINA MAURA

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Chapter One

RAVEN

“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 parents’ choosing... but the one they 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 merged 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 expression 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 upper 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?

Chapter Three

RAVEN

“I’m not sure we can seat the Astors that close to Ares’s brothers,” Mom says. “We definitely must invite them. Their family is on par with the Windsors, after all... but we cannot seat them that closely together. If I recall correctly, Adrian Astor strongly dislikes Ares’s brother, Lexington.”

I frown and look up from the charts. “Adrian doesn’t like Lex?” I ask, surprised. How could that be? Lexington is one of my favorite people in the whole world, and he attended Astor College with Leia. He’s the one who introduced me to Leia and Adrian in the first place.

“Yes, that’s what I heard. From what I understand, Adrian does not appreciate Lexington’s *playfulness*.”

Ah. I smirk knowingly. Lex must’ve provoked Adrian by flirting with Leia. Yeah, I can see that. Adrian isn’t very forgiving in the slightest, and I have no doubt he’d bear a grudge.

“Fine, we’ll just seat them further apart.”

Mom nods and rearranges their name cards on the tiny replica model she’s had made of Hannah’s wedding venue. “Everything has to be perfect,” Mom mutters. “Hannah has waited so long for this day.”

I just about keep from rolling my eyes. “She’s postponed the wedding three times, Mom. I don’t think she’s all that impatient.”

Mom looks up sharply, anger flashing through her eyes. “That’s because her work is demanding, Raven. You would never understand what it’s like to be an actress. All you need to do is stand still and look pretty all

day. It isn't the same for Hannah. She doesn't get to go home after one measly photoshoot. She's away from home for weeks on end, working on sets that aren't even remotely comfortable. Do you really think she *wanted* to postpone the wedding? She did that because she had no choice. Like I said, you would never understand, but the least you can do is keep silent if you have nothing good to say."

I bite down on my lip harshly to keep from talking back to her. She knows how demanding photographers can be, and how hard I work. Just a few weeks ago, I suffered from hypothermia because I'd been forced to shoot a commercial in the snow. I know better than to compare myself to Hannah, but I wish she wouldn't dismiss my work as merely *standing still and looking pretty*.

I suppose it doesn't matter what I do. All she cares about is that I didn't follow in her footsteps like Hannah did. My mother was a famous actress when she was my age, and she despises that I never had an interest in acting. No matter how hard I work, nothing else will ever be good enough.

My hands tremble as I go through our list of vendors. Why do I keep doing this to myself? Why do I keep coming home to help with a wedding I want no part of, just so I can spend time with a mother that'll always consider me second-best to her golden child? I'm not even asking her to treat me the way she treats Hannah. All I've ever wanted was an ounce of her love. Is that too much to ask?

"I'm sorry," Mom says, her voice strained. "The wedding has put so much pressure on me, and I took it out on you. I'm sorry, Raven. You understand, don't you? This wedding means a lot to both of our families. This merger has been years in the making, and once this wedding is behind us, we can finalize the remaining paperwork and leave the merged company in Hannah and Ares's hands. The Windsors refuse to proceed any further until the wedding is over, and your father and I need their funding."

I nod, my head bowed. "I get it, Mom."

She smiles at me then. "You've always been such a sweet girl, Raven. Hannah and I are both lucky to have you. I definitely couldn't have done any of this without you."

I smile back at her, glad the endless hours of work I've put into this haven't gone unnoticed. Hannah has barely been involved with the wedding preparations, and though it hurts to be constantly reminded of her

upcoming wedding, I'm glad I get to spend some time with Mom. It's rare for us to spend any quality time together.

"I can't believe my little girl is going to be someone's wife soon," Mom murmurs as she rearranges the flowers in the replica of the vineyard Ares and Hannah will be getting married in. "When your sister was little, I wasn't sure she'd even live long enough to fall in love. There were so many things I never thought she'd experience, yet here she is, an international superstar, about to marry one of the most eligible billionaires in the world. In the process, she's taking care of both Dad and me too, allowing us to retire at last, knowing our company is in safe hands."

Guilt and unease settle in my stomach. I shouldn't envy my sister, and I shouldn't begrudge her the pride in Mom's eyes. I just wish that sometimes, those same affections were directed at me.

"She'll make for a beautiful bride," I reassure Mom.

Mom looks up, a hint of worry in her expression. "How is the wedding dress coming along? Were you able to make the alterations Hannah requested?"

I nod. Each time she's postponed the wedding, she's changed almost everything about the wedding itself and her wedding dress, resulting in countless extra weeks of working on her gown. "Of course."

Mom hesitates. "It's nice that she asked you to make her dress for her. It's such a nice way to include you. I thought for sure that she'd have wanted a famous brand instead, but I suppose this'll help you gain traction. Once the world sees Hannah in one of your dresses, all her celebrity friends will follow suit. She's a trendsetter like that."

I bite down on my lip. "I've won several fashion awards, Mom. I've had a two-year waiting list for any of my couture wedding gowns ever since I launched my first line, and that list has only gotten longer since Alanna Sinclair got married in one of my gowns. My fashion brand is well-established and no less prestigious than some of the older brands out there."

Mom looks at me with a placating expression that instantly grates on me. "Oh, of course," she says, nodding. Then she grabs one of the wedding invites and holds it up. "Anyway, we need to make sure these are hand delivered three days before the wedding. Everything about this wedding must be secretive. If the paparazzi show up, it'll ruin Hannah's day. Why don't you double check that everything is well with the courier we booked?"

I sigh and rise to my feet. “Sure,” I tell her, grabbing my handbag. “I’ll do it tomorrow.”

Mom looks up at me and frowns. “You aren’t staying for dinner?”

“No. I’m shooting early tomorrow.”

Mom nods. “Oh, good. Don’t want to look too fat in your maid of honor dress either.”

My heart aches as I turn my back to my mother and walk away. Every time I see Mom, I feel like a horrible person, and I end up hating myself. I should be happy for Hannah, and I should feel honored that I’m being included in the wedding to this extent... but I hate it. I hate the person I become when I’m at home. I’m never this desperate for attention or acknowledgement, and though it hurts me to see her with Ares, I’ve never resented her for having his love. Yet each time I’m at home, my head fills with horrible thoughts.

What if the one Ares was marrying was me?

What if I never took her to Sierra’s birthday party?

What if I refused to help with the wedding?

What if I made a move on Ares and stole him away?

I’m better than this, but each time I come home, I turn into the most pathetic version of myself.

“Sweetheart?”

I look up at my father, and he sighs knowingly. “Let me walk you out, sweet girl.”

I nod and take the arm my dad is offering me. We’re both quiet as he walks me to the sports car that Ares helped me pick out.

Dad opens the door for me and hesitates. “I love you, Raven,” he says. “Your mother does too, but she just isn’t as good at conveying that.”

I bite down on my lip for a moment. “She has no problem conveying her love for Hannah.”

Dad reaches for my hair and pushes it behind my ear gently. “I know,” he murmurs. “Mom feels the need to be so vocal about it because of how rough Hannah had it when she was young. Your mother thinks that she can make up for all the pain Hannah endured when she was sick by showering her with love now. It’s more for her than it is for Hannah, and it doesn’t mean that she doesn’t love you just as much.”

I nod, unwilling to discuss this any further. I don’t want Dad to pity me, or to reassure me because he feels he should. For a change, I don’t want to be comforted with lies.

I rise to my tiptoes and press a kiss to my father's cheek. "Love you, Dad."

"You drive safe, okay? Send me a text message when you get home. I know how to use those emotions things now. I'll send you a thumbs up back."

"Emojis?" I ask, giggling.

"That's the ones."

"Good for you, Dad. I'll send you an emoji in the shape of a house when I get home, okay?"

"It'll be our secret language." He winks at me, and I just about manage to keep from laughing as I step into the car.

This. This is why I keep coming home, despite my mother's attitude. Because Dad is right. Deep down, they do love me. Maybe not as much as they love Hannah, but I learned long ago to be okay with that.

I'll never measure up to my older sister. Not in my parents' eyes, and certainly never in Ares's eyes.

Chapter Four

ARES

I tighten my grip on my phone and take a calming breath. “Hannah, you promised me we’d go together. This is the third time this month you’re canceling on me at the very last second. Couldn’t you at least have given me some adequate notice?”

The phone rustles and Hannah sighs. “I’m sorry, Ares. I really wanted to be there tonight, you know that. I wanted to support Raven *and* be there with you, but I just can’t get away. I need to retake some scenes, and it just hasn’t been going too well.”

“It’s always the same excuses, Hannah. I’m trying to be as supportive as I can be, but you’re making it really difficult. I can’t always be the one who makes compromises.”

“I know,” she says, her voice soft. “I’ll make it up to you.”

“Is this because you don’t want to be seen or photographed with me? Hannah, we’re getting married in a *month*. Don’t forget about our agreement. The moment we’re married, we’re taking our relationship public, so what’s the harm in us being captured together tonight?”

“Ares, it isn’t that. I promise, it isn’t. I’m taking so much time off for the wedding that I just really want to work extra hard to make up for it. I don’t want to be the reason we fall behind on schedule.”

I run a hand through my hair and look up at the ceiling. “I get it,” I tell her, defeated. I do understand it, but I’m starting to lose hope that things will ever change. I used to think I was the luckiest one out of my siblings.