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By Maisey Yates

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Maisey Yates knew she wanted to be a writer, even before she knew what it was she wanted to write. But after selling her first book to Harlequin, she still can't quite believe she's blessed enough to see her name on, not just any book, but her favorite books. Maisey lives with her supportive, handsome, wonderful, diaper-changing husband and three small children across the street from her parents, and the home she grew up in, in the wilds of Southern Oregon.

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"It's officially time to panic." Leah Holt finished reading her sister's text message and looked up at her father.

The expression on his face could only be described as shock, and Leah really couldn't blame him. She felt the same way. Everyone was here. Everything was planned. The decorations were in place, the cake was made. The media had been alerted and was out in full force. The groom was present and ready.

And the bride was gone.

"Why is it time to panic?" her father, Joseph Holt, asked.

She took a slow breath. She found she didn't want to tell her father. Didn't want to expose Rachel to censure. Because as upsetting as the text was, Leah knew Rachel well enough to know she wouldn't have done this without a very compelling reason. "She's gone. She's...she's not coming."

"Who is not coming?"

Leah looked up and her heart stopped. Ajax Kouros had chosen that precise moment to walk into the room, already dressed in a dark tuxedo, perfectly fitted to his masculine physique. He looked as untouchable as ever. A god more than a man.

Seeing him made her think of summer days at the estate. Of following him around and chatting his ear off. Her sister away at school, her father busy with work, her mother having tea with friends.

But Ajax had always been there to listen. Her sounding board. The one person she'd felt had understood her.

A lot of time had passed between then and now. She wasn't that girl anymore. Not foolish enough to think that a man like Ajax could be interested in her, or what she had to say. And he wasn't that boy, tanned from working shirtless in the sun.

He was a billionaire now. One of the world's most successful businessmen.

And today was the day he was marrying her sister. And officially gaining control of Holt Industries, along with a hefty piece of *her* own business, since so many of her shares were owned by her father's corporation.

At least, it was supposed to be the day he was marrying her sister and gaining control of Holt.

But Rachel was gone. Gone and not coming back, if her text was an indication. And it should be, since it said

she was gone and not coming back.

It was so out of character for her bright, beautiful sister. The eternal hostess and darling of the media had never once set a toe out of line. She was always gorgeous and graceful, a walking photo-op.

So very unlike Leah, who was a walking photo-op for a whole different reason. And the press loved to play it up. Loved to highlight her every shortfall, her every imperfection.

Leah swallowed hard and met Ajax's eyes. They were dark, hard. They always had been. Even when he'd been a boy, there had been no laughter there. No lightness. But the darkness was compelling to her, just as it had always been.

"Rachel isn't coming," she said, her voice barely a whisper, but deafening in the empty sitting room of her family estate.

"What do you mean she isn't coming?" he asked, his voice soft, a vein of granite running through it.

"It's just... She texted me. She... Here." She handed the phone to Ajax, nearly dropping it when his fingers brushed hers. "It says she wants to be with Alex, whoever that is, and that she can't marry you. Not now. She's sorry."

"I can read, Leah, but thank you." He handed the phone back to her, and she curled her fingers around it, holding it down at her side. He looked to her father. "Did you know?"

Joseph shook his head. "Did I know what? That she was having second thoughts? Not at all. I never pressured her to do this, Ajax. You know I wouldn't have. I was under the impression she was completely on board with this."

Ajax nodded once, then looked at Leah. "Did *you* know?"

"No." If she'd known, she would never have let things go this far. She would never have let Rachel leave Ajax like this, without warning. With the world watching.

"Alex who?" he asked, his tone sharp. "What other information is there?"

"I..." Leah scrolled back through her phone's messages. The look on Ajax's face was fierce, feral, like nothing she'd ever seen before. Usually he was so controlled, so unruffled. But now he was frightening. A different man entirely. "She doesn't say."

"Text her. Now."

"Ajax, if she needs space." Her father spoke tentatively. "I'm not overly concerned about that," Ajax bit out. Leah texted as quickly as she could, her fingers shaking. Alex who? Anyone I know?

You don't know him. Alex Christofides. Unexpected. And I'm sorry.

"Alex Christofides."

Ajax and her father shared a look that said volumes. The hair on the back of her neck prickled, goose bumps

rising on her skin as she realized the full implication of the name.

"Alexios," Leah said slowly. "Alexios Christofides."

"That would be the one," Ajax said. "Not content with attempts to destroy my business, the bastard has to destroy my wedding, as well. And make a grab for Holt, I imagine."

"Why, Ajax? Why does he have it in for you like this?"

A shadow passed over Ajax's face. "I don't know. Just business, I suppose."

"But she... Does she know that? Does she know who he is?"

"She wouldn't," Ajax said. "This isn't her world."

No. But it was hers. She knew about Alexios Christofides and his attempts to bump Ajax's retail and manufacturing conglomerate off the map, via covert stock purchases and reporting of illegal activities that hadn't even existed, much less been provable. Alexios had been a headache for Ajax in an increasingly alarming way over the past five years.

"And you never mentioned him to her?"

"As I said," he replied, teeth clenched, "it is not her world."

Leah sent another text to Rachel, while her father and Ajax continued talking.

He's an enemy of Ajax's. Didn't you know that? What if he's using you?

It's too late, L. Can't marry Jax now. I need to be with Alex.

The day of your wedding?

I'm sorry. Trust me. There isn't another way.

"If Rachel has chosen him," her father broke in, "then she's chosen him."

"Even if he's out to hurt Ajax? And what about the company? My business is rolled into this. I am going to get steam-rolled by his heavy machinery tactics."

"You're making the assumption that he doesn't care for Rachel. And that Rachel is a fool. I don't believe that, Leah," her father said.

No. Of course not. Rachel would never be so foolish. At least, that's what everyone would think. Sparkling, poised Rachel, who did so well in every social situation, would never be seduced away from the man she was meant to marry through lies and deceit. She was too savvy.

Leah didn't buy it. Her sister was wonderful. And as such had been coddled by the media. Rachel didn't see the ugly things in life. And the idea that a man, Alexios, might be lying to her, using her, made Leah's stomach churn.

"Sign it over to me," Ajax said, his attention on Joseph. "Revise the agreement."

"I would," Joseph said. "But the company is something that was promised to my daughters. To the husband of the first to be married."

"It was always meant to be me," Ajax said. "You made the offer with me in mind."

"Yes. Naturally, I assumed it would be you. But what can I do? I gave my word, and I would not have Rachel feel I was holding the company hostage to make her marry the man I wanted her to. And if this is her choice, it's her right to have the company in this matter if she chooses. She knows the agreement, too."

Leah knew the agreement, the promise, had only ever been intended for Ajax and Rachel. Joseph loved Ajax like the son he'd never had, and he and Rachel had seemed like a logical and clear match from moment one. As though Ajax was always meant to be a part of their family.

But now everything was falling apart. And Leah's stores, her business, her entire life, were all wrapped up in the package that might now be delivered into the hands of Ajax's enemy.

If Alex was making a grab for Holt, intent on wrapping his hand around it and crushing it for vengeance against Ajax, then he was going to crush Leah's dreams along with it.

She wasn't the media darling. She wasn't the beautiful one. She wasn't the one who attracted men. She had Leah's Lollies. Her business was on the upswing, building and becoming a sort of trend. Candy from one of her stores was fast becoming one of the most popular gift items in the world. Tiffany Blue might be iconic, but Leah Pink was starting to gain momentum.

She wouldn't lose it. She couldn't. It was who she was.

"I need to talk to Ajax alone," she said, before she could fully process her request. "Please," she said to her father.

He nodded once. "If you must." He looked at Ajax. "I am sorry, my son. But I cannot force her down the aisle. No matter that I wouldn't have had her leave you today, I won't force her. And if she has chosen Alex, no matter who he is to you, if she is intent on him, I won't stop that, either."

"I would never ask that of you," Ajax said, his voice hard.

Her father turned and walked out of the room, and Leah fought the urge to follow him. To try to reason with him. It would be easier than dealing with Ajax. But her father wouldn't bend on this. He had given his word, and in Joseph Holt's world, one where men had honor, one where men didn't stoop so low as to use a woman as part of a business firefight, your word was all that was needed.

But that wasn't the real world. She knew it. Ajax knew it.

Ajax pushed his hand through his hair and looked out the window again. "The question is, what is to be done? There is an agreement, drawn up and ready to sign. There is a wedding planned. There are a thousand guests coming in only three hours. The media will be there. This has been hailed as the wedding of the century. So the question is—" he turned to face Leah "—what is to be done?" His control was fraying slightly, an edge to his voice that Leah wasn't accustomed to.

She looked at his face, at the hard lines around his mouth. At the worry in his eyes. Ajax Kouros, worried. And the answer hit her. So clear, so simple. This was how things worked in business, and what they were dealing with was a business-related problem. A contract that needed signing.

Or to be specific, two contracts that needed signing.

"What was the extent of your deal? What did the contract say?"

"Ownership of Holt was to pass to me upon signing the wedding agreement, contingent on the fact that the marriage last for five years. Otherwise, ownership returns to your father."

"And the names on the document?"

"No names. Interchangeable. That's the issue."

"Five-year minimum?"

"Yes."

"I'll do it," Leah said.

The words hung in the room, too loud in the emptiness.

For one fleeting moment she felt exposed. Awkward. No. She wasn't that girl anymore. She was stronger than that. She'd learned. Never expose yourself. Never let them see you cry.

"You will do what?" Ajax asked, dark eyes now trained on her.

"I..." Insecurity rose up and grabbed her by the throat, choking her. Past Leah, the Leah who had idolized Ajax. The girl who had made a fool of herself chasing after his attention, his affection. The idiotic teenager who had nearly declared her-self just before he'd declared his love for Rachel.

It's for Leah's Lollies. It has nothing to do with those feelings. It's for Holt.

She wasn't a slave to those old feelings anymore. Sure, she'd dreamed of Ajax when she was a girl, but then, like everyone else, he'd chosen Rachel. And she'd learned never to expose herself like that again. Had learned how to cover up pain under a layer of armor. Because the alternative was to show it to the world, and damn your pride.

Well, she was quite fond of her pride.

"I'll marry you. And then the guests and the companies, yours, mine and Holt, and all of that will be fine. And no matter what, no matter if Rachel marries Christofides next month or...tomorrow, it won't be him that gets his hands on Holt. It will be okay. All of it."

He laughed, humorless, dark. "It will all be fine, will it? Perfection. Just a slight hiccup."

"I'm well aware this is more than a hiccup. But it's better than nothing, right?"

Ajax was not an expressive man. He'd been good to her sister, but not overly affectionate. She'd wondered more than once exactly what sort of relationship they had. If it was more convenience than passion. But just then, she had to acknowledge that Ajax looked very much like a man who'd lost the love of his life.

Ajax put his fingers through his hair again, the look in his eyes so different to what she was used to. Lost. It reminded her of a younger version of him. Of the boy he'd been before coming to the Holt Estate. A boy she'd never known.

She still remembered the moment she'd met him, when they'd come to the estate for the summer. It was like the world had fallen away. Like *she'd* fallen away.

She'd been so young, but there had been something about him that had pulled her to him. He'd, in an instant, been so many things to her. And he'd listened. He'd made her feel important. Special. And she'd clung to him, followed him around like a lost puppy. Obvious. Just thinking about it made her skin crawl with embarrassment.

He looked at her, that lost look in his eyes fading as suddenly as it had appeared. Now his gaze was unreadable, un-expressive. Like he was looking over a new yacht, or sports car. Well, no, not even that. He got a bit more passionate over sports cars. And dark chocolate. That was one thing they had in common. Or at least something they'd had in common.

Handy, because she was short on sports cars, but she did have a lot of dark chocolate. Occupational hazard. Although, she'd stopped trying to tempt him with treats a while ago. About the time she'd realized she was staring at him like an idiot and he only had eyes for her sister.

"You will have to do."

The way he said it made her want to melt into a puddle and slither out of the room. She was being compared to Rachel, again, and being found utterly lacking. "Thanks. And you're welcome."

"Don't expect me to be happy about any of this." He started to pace. "My bride has walked out on me. Chosen my rival over me. And she didn't even have the courtesy to text *me* about it. Rather she contacted you."

"I'm her sister."

"And I'm the man she was supposed to love," he bit out.

She put her hand on his arm, a flash of heat racing from her fingertips and through her body. She pulled back as though she'd been burned.

She hadn't expected that. Hadn't expected to feel that intense, scorching heat. After all, she'd stopped carrying a torch for Ajax years ago. Though, that didn't change the fact that he was an incredibly handsome man. The heat was only due to a physical attraction. She was only human. She imagined any woman who touched him would feel the same way.

Thank God she knew how to hide that moment of insanity. She'd spent years cultivating her mask, one that kept the press at a distance. One that kept her from getting hurt. One of indifference. A smooth, cutting smile on hand whenever she needed it. One that said: *Oh, you again. Can't be bothered.*

Oh, dear Lord. I proposed to him.

That thought made her smile slip.

Users Review

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