

CHAPTER ONE – MISTER WRONG

Matt

He was wrong for her.

That was the only thought running through my head as I rechecked every inch of the church. So completely wrong for her. This latest disappearing act, the most recent proof. He'd skipped out on her before, but today was different.

Today, they were supposed to get married. Today, Cora Matthews would become Cora Adams. She'd have my last name. But not in the way I'd hoped for—not that I hadn't accepted that years ago.

She'd chosen him. My brother. My twin brother. She'd chosen him forever ago, and that was that. She'd been as good as Mrs. Jacob Adams since the day Cora Matthews first showed up in our lives eighteen years ago.

At least until today, when Cora was going to be marching toward an empty altar in fifteen minutes if I didn't find the supposed Mister Right. Jacob wasn't the right one—for a dozen reasons I could list—but he was who she wanted and he'd done his best to convince her she was all he wanted too. But I knew better.

My brother had always been indulged; being the “firstborn” son—by a whole three minutes—to a wealthy family has a way of doing that. The problem arose when the boy grew into a man who wanted to be equally indulged in all sorts of ways that a wife would likely frown upon. Jacob wasn't the right one for her. I knew that. Hell, I think even he knew that when he surfaced from his self-adoring stupor every so often.

Not that I was the right one for Cora either. I was just as wrong for her as Jacob was, but in a different way. See, where he'd always loved her too little, I'd loved her too much. So I'd kept my secret for years and watched the girl I loved fall in love with the brother I'd shared a womb with for thirty-eight weeks. The brother I loved and looked after, despite his faults.

God knew I had a shit ton of my own.

That was why I was about to start tearing this church apart in order to find him. I was looking after his interests as well as Cora's, because even though he had a piss-poor way of showing it, he loved her. In his own way. If you could call what Jacob felt for anyone love. In a way, it was love, but in another way, it was the opposite.

“Where the hell's Jacob?” The senior Adams, also known as Dad, asked when I circled into the lobby again, hoping my missing brother had magically appeared. He was holding my brother's tux zipped up in an expensive bag and looking at me like I was failing the task of keeping track of my brother as I'd failed all the rest presented to me in life.

Where the hell's Jacob? How many times had I asked myself that question? How many times had I probably known or had a good idea where he was?

“He's back in one of the church offices waiting. Just got here.” I had to slow myself down when I heard the words wobble. It had been years since I'd stuttered over a word, and now was not the time to resurrect that old habit. “I'll take it down to him.”

I grabbed the tux from Dad and backed down the hall, trying to ignore the stuffed sanctuary and the orchestra playing some song that sounded more fitting for a funeral than a wedding.

That was what this was about to become if I didn't do something. Whether it would be my dad murdering me for flunking my best man responsibilities of keeping track of the groom, or me murdering Jacob when I finally found his pathetic ass after doing this to Cora on today of all days, someone was going to die.

"That tux isn't going to put itself on a groom, Matt. Get after it." Dad motioned me down the hall before he marched toward the sanctuary like he was ready to get this over with.

He wasn't thrilled about the wedding. Didn't exactly approve of the match. It wasn't that he didn't love Cora, because he did, like a daughter. He just didn't find her fitting as a daughter-in-law, especially to his prized firstborn who was incapable of doing wrong. He probably wouldn't have cared so much if she was marrying me, which was disconcerting to say the least. The only person who'd approve of Cora and me ending up together was my dad.

As I jogged down the hall, carrying a found tux to a missing groom, Dad's last words replayed through my mind. That tux isn't going to put itself on a groom.

A groom.

A groom.

My plan was already forming as I ducked into a dark church office, my fingers working my tie loose. Jacob wasn't just my twin brother—he was my identical twin brother.

I was maybe a little bit taller and he was maybe a little bit fuller, but not enough that anyone would notice. Not enough, I hoped, that Cora would notice. She used to confuse us all the time when we were growing up together and still, on occasion, she'd mistake me for Jacob and Jacob for me. Like the last time I'd been at her and Jacob's condo when she'd thrown a surprise party for him. I'd been talking with a group of old friends, she slid by me, found my hand, and gave it the briefest of squeezes. She'd thought I was Jacob. I knew that because she never touched me anymore. At least not on purpose. We used to be comfortable enough with each other that she'd hug me without thinking, but that changed when she and Jacob became a thing. An official thing.

She didn't touch me anymore, not even to nudge me for saying something stupid, which I said all too often in her presence. But that night, she'd touched me. And a year later, I could still remember the way her small hand felt falling into mine.

Cora would be distracted today—nervous. I knew because she'd told me how panicked she was about standing in front of five hundred people. She'd be so distracted by trying to keep herself from passing out or hyperventilating, so would she really notice if the man standing across from her in front of that altar was me?

I was banking on the chance that she wouldn't, as I changed from my suit into Jacob's tux as fast as humanly possible. The clock on the wall was fast, hopefully, or else I had two and a half minutes to get my ass up front so that when Cora started down the aisle, she'd have someone waiting for her.

Someone who loved her.

As I tied the shiny dress shoes, I tried to put aside all of the inner voices telling me how wrong this was. How utterly and unforgivably wrong this was. I knew it was wrong. I knew that. But it was just as wrong to do nothing. It was wrong to let Jacob ruin another moment for her. By doing something that I knew was wrong, I hoped I was ultimately doing the right thing.

Maybe he wasn't where I thought he was, hungover and waking up in some girl's bed. Maybe he'd gotten into an accident or been kidnapped or . . . damn, then I'd feel like a real piece of shit for thinking the worst about my own brother. Maybe something legitimate had come up and he'd have some great explanation and I'd pull him aside to let him know I'd stepped in and no one besides us would know what had gone down.

And maybe Jacob had decided to turn over a new leaf and not be such a selfish prick, I thought with a sigh.

Pausing in front of the picture hanging beside the door, I adjusted the bowtie as best I could before tearing the door open and jogging down the hall. Jacob's tux was a little big for me, and his shoes a little small, but those were minor discomforts compared to what my psyche was putting me through.

The ring.

Fuck.

After sprinting back to the office, I wrestled the ring box out of the pocket of my jacket, along with my wallet and phone—just in case I didn't make it back here anytime soon—then I kicked my suit behind a bookcase in the event that someone stumbled into the room to find an abandoned suit and started asking questions.

My dad's face was red by the time I made it inside the sanctuary, but when he saw me, his face relaxed and he smiled. It took me a moment to realize he wasn't smiling at me—he was smiling at Jacob.

Dad never really smiled at me too much. Smirks were more the way of it.

"Where the hell's Matt?" one of the groomsmen, Hunter, whispered when I passed.

God, this church was stuffed to capacity. And hot. And lacking in oxygen.

"Barfing up his guts," I answered quietly, reminding myself that I was Jacob and needed to talk and sound like him.

The groomsmen rocked with silent laughter. They were all Jacob's friends; none were mine.

"Go figure. We're the ones drinking places dry, and it's your brother, the DD, yacking his insides out today."

My shoulder lifted in the dismissive way Jacob's did. "Some guys have all the luck."

"And some guys named Matt Adams have none," Aaron, another groomsman, whispered up the line.

Didn't I know it?

They didn't make any more jokes or jeers at my expense because they knew better. Jacob and I might have seen things differently and been as unlike as two people could be, but we were twins. He stood up for me and vice versa. He had my back, I had his.

As my current predicament proved.

The orchestra broke into a new song—the "Wedding March". The collar of Jacob's dress shirt felt like it was strangling me at the same time it felt like someone had just dialed up the temperature in the room by twenty degrees.

What am I doing? Why am I doing it? Is it right? Or wrong?

The answers to those questions didn't have a chance to form because that was when I saw her. Like the thousands of times before, the world faded away when Cora Matthews walked into the room. When she started down the aisle, I swayed a little and had to step out of line to keep myself from toppling into the minister.

"Easy there, big guy," Hunter said under his breath, elbowing me. "Too late for cold feet. Bride is en route."

I wanted to tell him it wasn't cold feet I had, but something else. It was the feeling of being so sure of something that the rest of the world seemed off-kilter. So sure of something that the rest of the world just didn't make sense. I'd never been as certain of anything as I was about the woman walking toward me, about to marry me.

Under false pretenses.

I had to remind myself of that when Cora's eyes found mine and her plastered-on smile crumbled behind a real one. She was smiling at me the way she smiled at him—like I was her world.

Matthew Adams had never been her whole world, but unknown to her, she'd been mine. That was why I was standing here now, posing as my twin brother, as his fiancée took the final steps toward me. I was doing this for her because I knew she loved him, and I didn't want to see her hurt again at my brother's hand.

Marry the woman you love, Matt, then let her spend the rest of her life with the man she loves.

The orchestra was just playing its final chords when Cora stopped beside me, her eyes matching the real smile still on her face. God, she was beautiful.

Too beautiful, I thought again, as I noticed the line of groomsmen appraising her with more than just casual regard. Cora had always been more than another one of the pretty girls; she was the standout. Every guy knew the type. The girl who shouldn't be real, but there she was, passing you in the hallway every morning. The girl who's noticed by every person she passes, male or female. She was so beautiful on the outside, few people took the time to get to know the beauty hiding underneath, but I had. I knew she was beautiful everywhere.

Jacob. Channel Jacob, I reminded myself as everyone took a collective seat behind us.

"Hey," I whispered to her, winking.

Hey? What a moron. Who says hey to the woman he's about to marry when she stopped beside him looking so damn perfect. I couldn't feel my lungs.

"Hey," she whispered back, like she didn't think anything of it.

Because, yeah, Jacob totally would have said hey to his bride like a moron.

Cora had been versed in moron for practically two decades.

As the minister started droning on about something I probably should have been paying attention to, I tuned out. This wasn't my wedding. This was hers. This was his. So instead I watched Cora, memorizing every detail of her face as she stared at the man across from her, who loved her like she was both a poison and an antidote.

When the pastor asked if I promised to love and cherish her, in sickness and in health, until death do us part, that was the easiest question I'd ever had to answer. It was the simplest part of this mess of a day.

"I will."