

Chapter 4 Finding You Again

Aurora slipped out the hospital's back entrance, careful to avoid the media swarm. Her destination was clear: Cloud Island, Maverick's private sanctuary. Few knew of its existence, but she and Maverick had grown up together until she turned eighteen, before everything fell apart.

The shoreline's security was impenetrable. Nothing moved without Maverick's explicit permission.

As she approached through the darkness, the guards' expressions shifted from alert to shock. Word traveled quickly up the chain of command, and soon Howard Webb, Maverick's right-hand man, appeared at the dock, his face tight with barely contained anger.

"Haven't you caused enough trouble?" Howard said, his voice cold. "Why make him suffer more?"

Aurora's stomach dropped. "What's wrong with him?" she asked, her voice laced with concern.

"He's barely alive, no thanks to you," Howard replied, his lip curled in disgust. "Go home, Miss Sage. You gave up your place here when you broke the engagement."

"I have to see him," she insisted, her voice shaking, her heart clenching painfully. "If you turn me away, I'll throw away the life he saved."

Howard studied her for a long moment. "So you know it was him," he said finally. "At least you have that much sense left." His fists clenched as he conceded. "Fine. But hurt him again, and you won't leave this island alive."

Despite his strong reluctance, Howard had no choice but to agree. His boss called for this woman through the whole surgery. She was still his everything.

After Aurora followed Howard up the island road, the estate loomed before them, grand and imposing. They walked in silence through long corridors until they reached Maverick's room. Black-suited guards flanked the door while a team of international doctors hovered nearby, ready at a moment's notice.

Howard took a covered tray from a hovering servant and passed it to

Aurora. "He hasn't touched food since regaining consciousness. Make sure he eats, then leave. Don't try playing any tricks."

Aurora stepped into the room, her heart thundering. Amber wall sconces cast a soft glow, their light competing with the steady blink of medical monitors. Maverick lay still, IV lines snaking into his hand, his brows furrowed even in sleep, his lips bloodless.

The sight of him, this invincible man brought low for her sake, made her chest ache. She'd repaid his sacrifice by breaking their engagement for Scott, of all people. Her fingers reached out, almost of their own accord, to touch his face.

Maverick was in a restless sleep. In this new timeline, he'd been fighting death daily since saving her, haunted by dreams of her previous life's torment in the flames.

He'd sworn to keep her close this time, regardless of her hatred, to never again let her supposed loved ones destroy her. Every moment apart was torture, dreading what might befall her.

The scent of her perfume teased his senses. His eyes snapped open, one hand shooting out to grasp her jaw as he pulled her onto the bed, the other hitting the lights.

For a moment, he thought he was still dreaming, but there she was, her delicate face inches from his, clear eyes brimming with tears, skin glowing with youth. The sight pierced his carefully constructed walls.

"Aurora?" His voice cracked. "How..."

Blood welled where he'd torn out his IV, but he barely noticed, his eyes rimmed red as he held her, desperate to confirm she was real in his arms. In his previous life, he'd died first, never knowing if she'd survived.

"You idiot." Aurora choked on the words, her fists beating against his chest. "Why did you risk yourself like this? Did you think playing the mysterious hero would make me grateful?"

He grimaced, muscles tensing beneath her assault. "Who told you I saved you?" he asked, his voice laced with pain.

"Stop lying. Let me go," she said, tears spilling down her cheeks as she tried to pull away, stung by his coldness.

His arms locked around her. "Never," he whispered, the single word holding volumes.

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Only then did she notice the bandages covering his chest and shoulder, now staining red from their struggle. "You're bleeding," she said, her voice laced with concern. "Let me get the doctor."

She scrambled to get up, but he grabbed her wrist, holding her in place.

"Who gave you permission to come?" he asked, his voice cold. "Just wanted to see me weak?"

"No," she said. "I came to apologize."

He backed her against the wall, pinning her hands above her head. "For what?" His cold, pale lips were pressed against her cheek, his deep voice rumbling in her ears.

She fought through her trembling, trying to catch a glimpse of his face, but she couldn't break free. "For getting you hurt," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. "For breaking our engagement."

"Playing nice now?" His eyes stormed with emotion as he gripped her chin, turning her to face him. "Thought you couldn't stand the sight of me."

She had loathed him in her past life, and wouldn't even look his way. The contrast between then and now must be jarring.

Aurora's tear-filled eyes met his as she grasped his arms. "I don't want to break it anymore," she said, her voice filled with conviction. "If I say I want to marry you... would you still have me?"

The words took all her courage, but she meant them. His blood shed for her was a debt of honor she would spend her life repaying.

Maverick went still. His hands tightened on her waist as his intense gaze bore into her. "Do you understand what you're offering?" he asked, his voice low and husky.

