

Madly Yours

Chapter 11

Just as her anxiety peaked, Hudson looked away, leaning back into the leather seat. His throat moved slightly as he spoke. "Get in."

Relieved, Nora slipped into the car. The door clicked shut, instantly cutting off San Francisco's humid afternoon heat.

The black Maybach merged smoothly into the highway traffic, passing a blur of road signs. They weren't heading toward the Reed family home, nor were they on the route to the Lancaster estate.

Even though she hadn't been back to San Francisco in two years, she still remembered the main roads. She turned to look at the man beside her.

Hudson had his eyes closed, resting. The shifting shadows cast sharp, predatory angles across his profile. His silk shirt rose and fell with his steady breathing, and in the hollow of his collarbone, a faint scar was barely visible.

"Mr. Lancaster," Nora began carefully. "Where exactly are we going?"

Hudson slowly opened his eyes. "City Hall."

Nora froze, certain she had misheard him. "What?"

"To get our marriage license."

Silence stretched between them.

Hudson rested his arm casually on the center console. His sleeves were rolled up to his elbows, revealing stark, luminous skin and the faint blue pulse of his veins.

"Didn't your parents tell you?" he asked, his tone flat. "The Lancaster and Reed wedding is set for the end of the month. The paperwork is already arranged. All we have to do today is sign."

Nora opened her mouth but found no words. She had only agreed to take her sister's place in this marriage two days ago. Rushed into the arrangement, she was completely blind to the details.

She certainly never expected to be dragged straight to City Hall the moment she landed in San Francisco. There was zero time to process any of this.

"But," she stammered, scrambling for an excuse. "I just got off the plane."

"I know you don't want this." Hudson fixed his dark, piercing gaze on her. "Which is why this is strictly a marriage of convenience."

Nora blinked in surprise. Hudson looked away, his jaw tightening in the dappled light filtering through the window.

"My grandmother is in poor health, and she wants to see me settle down," he explained. "We stay married for one year. We both get what we want."

She pressed her lips together, digesting the information. "Then, what exactly do you need me to do?"

Hudson turned back to her. His eyes were impossibly dark in the shadows of the car, reflecting her tense silhouette. For a fleeting second, his stare carried a physical weight that made her breath catch.

"Just be Mrs. Lancaster," he said.

He paused.

His long fingers tapped twice against the leather, the dull thud echoing in the quiet cabin.

"You'll receive a monthly allowance of a hundred thousand dollars, plus a villa in Azure Bay when the year is up." His gaze flicked down to her pursed lips. "On top of that, the Lancaster family will handle your family's current financial mess."

It was an offer too generous to refuse. Nora lowered her lashes, letting silence stretch between them for a few seconds.

"During this agreement," she looked up, a wave of suffocating tension washing over her, "will I be expected to fulfill marital duties?"

Her jaw was tight as she asked the question, her eyelashes casting trembling shadows on her cheeks.

Hudson's gaze swept over her without hesitation. He took in the slight flush on the tips of her ears, her teeth nervously worrying her lower lip, and trailed down to the luminous skin of her collarbone exposed by the V-neck of her blouse.

His eyes lingered there for a second before snapping away. His throat moved. "I am a man with needs."

Nora froze. Once the heavy implication of his words registered, a hot flush spread all the way down her neck.

"Do we have a deal?"

She bit her lip. From the moment she agreed to take her sister's place, she knew there was no turning back.

"Yes."

At her nod, Hudson closed his eyes again. A barely perceptible smirk tugged at the corner of his mouth before vanishing instantly.

The black Maybach crossed the suspension bridge, leaving the towering skyline of San Francisco in the rearview mirror.

The car finally pulled up to an imposing gray marble building.

Nora looked out the window. It was the civic center. One of the city's oldest marriage registries, nestled halfway up the hill with a sweeping view of the bustling Financial District.