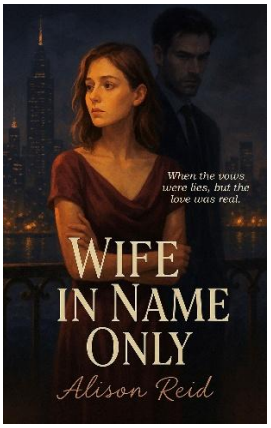
# Wife in Name Only

by Alison Reid




The smell of old books and stronger medicines hung heavy in Henry Fitzgerald's study, wrapping around Renee like a shroud. The scent of aged leather bindings and antiseptic mingled in the air, a cruel reminder of time slipping away. The fire crackled behind the grate, casting golden shadows across the mahogany-panelled walls, but its warmth didn't touch her.

She sat upright in the armchair across from her grandfather, hands folded tightly in her lap, knuckles bloodless. Her pulse beat a steady, anxious rhythm against her ribs—warning, warning, warning—like her body already knew what her mind refused to guess.

Henry's once-booming voice had softened over the last year, thinned by chemotherapy and the truth they all tried to deny. But tonight, it carried a sharp edge of clarity. The same voice that once brokered million-dollar acquisitions now sliced through the silence like a verdict.

"I need you to marry Hudson."

The words landed like a slap.

Renee blinked.

"Excuse me?"

Henry leaned back in his chair, his posture still commanding despite the fragility creeping into his frame. His once-black hair had turned almost entirely silver, and his hands trembled slightly where they rested on the armrests. But his eyes—steel-grey and unyielding—locked onto hers with quiet determination.

"I'm dying, sweetheart." No euphemisms. No softening. "No treatments. No miracles. No second chances. I need to know you'll be safe when I'm gone… and that the company will be in the right hands."

A thousand thoughts screamed in her mind, but all she could manage was a brittle whisper.

"I don't need a man to be safe, Granddad."

"I know you don't." His tone gentled, but the weight behind it never lessened. "But the world still acts like you do. You're young. Brilliant. Loyal. But you give too much, and you trust too easily. I won't always be here to protect you… or this company. Hudson's solid. Strategic. He'll guard Fitzgerald Enterprises like it's his own."

Renee's spine stiffened. She kept her expression neutral—years of business meetings had taught her how to mask emotion—but inside, she flinched.

Hudson Waterford.

The name alone stirred a familiar ache. He'd been her grandfather's protégé, a golden boy with a sharp mind and a gaze that always seemed to look through her instead of at her. She'd fallen for him when she was nineteen, working internships in the corporate offices, desperate to impress both the man she admired and the one she adored in silence.

Hudson had never seen her. Not really. Not as a woman. Just as Henry's serious granddaughter, good with numbers and better with restraint.

And now Henry wanted to hand her to him like a peace offering. Or worse—a contingency plan.

"I know it's asking a lot," Henry added softly, watching her closely. "But I need this, Renee. I need to know that everything I built, everything your father would've protected if he'd lived… will be guarded after I'm gone."

Her throat tightened at the mention of her father. The pain of his sudden death—the car accident, the empty chair at birthdays, the way Henry had stepped in like a fortress around her after—still lived quietly in the corners of her heart.

Henry had been her rock. Her anchor. When her world fractured at thirteen, it was he who dried her tears and taught her to fight with her brain, not her heart. He'd been more father than grandfather ever since.

And now… he was asking her to give him peace in return.

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