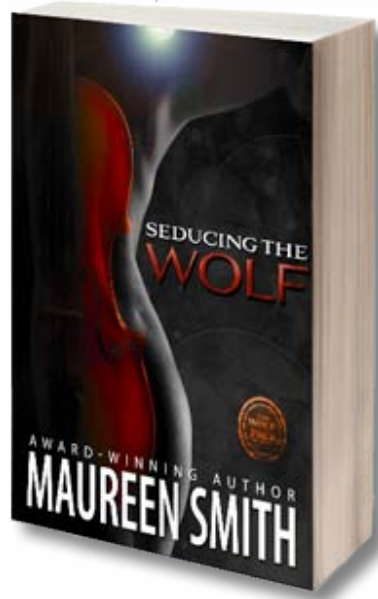


MAUREEN SMITH



AN EXCERPT FROM **SEDUCING THE WOLF**

Chapter 1

Manning Wolf slid from the rumpled bed and crept soundlessly across the shadowy hotel room to reach the chair over which he'd slung his clothes the night before. Guided by the sliver of daylight that seeped through the heavy drapes, he began getting dressed—a task made easier by the way he'd methodically layered his clothing on the back of the chair. Boxers on top, followed by his undershirt, socks, pants, broadcloth shirt.

He always waited until his lovers fell asleep before he got up, gathered his strewn garments and arranged them on the chair so he could make a clean getaway in the morning.

As he quietly shrugged into his Armani suit jacket and slipped on his shoes, a shadow of cynicism curved his mouth. Just when had he become the proverbial love 'em and leave 'em type? When had he become a shallow playboy who could bed a different woman nearly every week without feeling more than a pang of guilt?

Once upon a time, he'd dreamed of having the kind of relationship that his parents had. A deep, passionate, unshakable love that could weather any and every storm. He'd expected—hoped—to find that same blissful perfection with the woman of his dreams.

A woman who could complete his sentences, and could set him on fire with just one look.

A woman who rode his mind whenever they were apart.

A woman he loved unconditionally and couldn't live without.

But somewhere along the way he'd lost his sense of optimism. Lost his will to believe or hope.

Somewhere along the way he'd lost his soul.

Because he hadn't found her.

The One.

Shaking off the gloomy musings—which reeked of self-pity—Manning stuffed his silk tie into the pocket of his suit jacket and turned to regard the shadowy outline of the woman lying beneath the white covers. She was sleeping soundly with the sheets twisted around her nude body, exposing one shapely thigh. Her tousled dark hair spilled over her face, concealing her features in a way that seemed oddly symbolic given that Manning would probably forget what she looked like by the end of the day.

Grimacing at the thought, Manning crossed to the bathroom to splash cold water onto his face and rinse his mouth with the hotel's complimentary mouthwash.

When he emerged, he was relieved to see that his lover hadn't stirred. He'd worn her out last night, making her come so many times she'd been delirious by the time they were done. So it'd probably be a few more hours before she woke up.

Manning lingered for a moment, eyeing the cherry bedside table. Leaving his business card would give her the impression that he wanted to see her again. Leaving money—even for a cab—would make her feel like a cheap prostitute. Neither was the message he wanted to send.

So he left the table empty and headed for the door, making a mental note to have his secretary send flowers with a note from him thanking her for a good time.

At the door he paused and glanced over his shoulder at the sleeping woman. His conscience pricked him as he imagined her waking up and looking around for him, her confusion quickly turning to disappointment when she realized that he'd left without saying good-bye.

Sorry, Manning mouthed to her. It's nothing personal.

With that, he turned and left without a sound.

As he sauntered down the elegantly carpeted corridor, his cell phone vibrated. He dug it out of his jacket pocket to check the text message.

We still meeting at Mike's tonight? Mason Wolf wanted to know. He was referring to their cousin's popular soul food restaurant, where the five Wolf brothers were supposed to meet that evening to finalize plans for their parents' surprise anniversary celebration.

Yeah, tonight, Manning typed back. And don't be late, Pipsqueak, or I'ma kick your ass.

Whatever, Mason retorted.

Manning chuckled softly.

It didn't matter that Mason was a grown man and one of the NFL's top wide receivers, boasting the kind of stats that had guaranteed his future enshrinement in the Hall of Fame. It didn't matter that everywhere he went, fans clamored for his autograph and women slipped him their panties and phone numbers scrawled in lipstick. As far as Manning was concerned, Mason would always be his kid brother—aka “Pipsqueak.”

As Manning boarded the empty elevator, he received another text message, this time from his ninety-seven-year-old great-grandmother. Ever since she'd learned how to text, Mama Wolf had gotten up at the crack of dawn every morning to send personalized daily thoughts to all of her great-grandsons.

After pressing the button for the lobby, Manning read today's message from Mama Wolf.

A consistent soul believes in destiny, a capricious one in chance.

Manning read the quote again, then smiled to himself. He truly appreciated his great-grandmother's inspirational nuggets of wisdom, and he looked forward to receiving them every day—even if the messages didn't always make sense to him.

Tucking his phone back into his pocket, he stepped off the elevator and strode across the luxurious lobby. The upscale hotel, located in the heart of downtown Atlanta, was one that he frequently used for entertaining clients, out of town guests and, yes, mistresses.

As he approached the front desk, the blond clerk gave him a bright, cheerful smile that defied the early hour.

“Did you enjoy your stay, Dr. Wolf?”

“I did, thank you.” Manning smiled. “Listen, I have to run to a meeting, but my companion is going to take advantage of your excellent amenities a while longer. Can you make sure she's well taken care of? Breakfast in bed, spa treatment, massage—anything she wants. And when she's ready to leave, send for my driver.”

“Yes, sir,” the clerk promised. “I'll see to it that she receives the VIP treatment.”

“Thanks, I appreciate it.” Manning glanced discreetly at the woman's nametag, then winked. “Have a good day, Phoebe.”

She beamed with pleasure. “Same to you, Dr. Wolf. Come back and see us soon.”

“I will.”

Manning slid on a pair of dark sunglasses as he started toward the front entrance, where he could see his chauffeured car waiting outside in the circular driveway. He and Mr. Haley had been together for so long that Manning hadn't needed to summon the driver. Whenever he stayed out late—and chose not to drive—Mr. Haley knew to pick him up by six-thirty the next morning, unless he requested otherwise.

Manning had nearly reached the double glass doors when his attention was snared by the sight of a woman standing in line at the hotel's gourmet coffee shop. Out of habit he stopped and lowered his shades to peer over the rim, giving the woman a slow, thorough perusal.

She had skin the color of melted brown sugar. Her dark hair was pulled back from her face and secured into a high bun, like a ballerina's. She wore a midriff-baring off-the-shoulder top with dark jeans that molded a round, luscious ass and long, curvy legs that any man would kill to have wrapped around his back during hot, raunchy sex.

Dayuum, Manning thought, swallowing hard as his groin heated.

He knew he should keep it moving. He needed to get home and change for work, and after the way he'd just snuck out on one woman, he had no business even looking at another.

But he couldn't resist.

So he backtracked and casually sauntered into the coffee shop.

The woman was at the counter placing her order, and as Manning approached, the view got even better.

He stepped in line behind her, close enough to savor the sweet scent of her skin, to envy the smooth wisps of hair that caressed the nape of her neck, to feel the heat radiating from her body.

He was intoxicated, and he hadn't even seen her face yet.

Murmuring her thanks to the cashier, the woman picked up her coffee, then turned and ran smack into Manning's chest.

"Shit!" she hissed as the covered cup slipped from her hand and fell to the floor, spilling creamy coffee.

"My bad, darling," Manning drawled, tingling from the brief contact with her lush body. "Didn't mean to get in your way."

"No, it's my fault," she muttered, her eyes concealed behind dark sunglasses as she quickly sidestepped the spreading pool of coffee. "I wasn't watching where I was going."

They knelt together and reached for the fallen cup at the same time. As their hands connected, their gazes met over the tops of their shades.

"Oh, my God," the woman breathed, pushing her sunglasses off her face as he did the same. "Manning?"

Manning couldn't believe his eyes.

"Taylor?" he whispered.

Time stood still.

As they stared at each other, memories bombarded Manning like a movie reel painting images onto his eyes. He remembered their first kiss, her lips soft and sweetly flavored with his great-grandmother's pound cake.

He remembered their first date, which had ended with him chasing her through the snow, her girlish peals of laughter filling him with such joy he could hardly contain it.

God, and he remembered the first and only time they'd made love. The most profoundly beautiful night of his life, and the most heartbreakingly painful.

As they rose from the floor—spilled coffee forgotten—Manning caught Taylor around the waist and swept her right off her feet. As he spun her around, she laughed and clung tightly to his neck. They were oblivious to the minor commotion

they were causing, the curious stares and smiles they were attracting from other customers.

After another jubilant twirl, Manning set Taylor down and slowly looked her over, staggered by how much she'd changed over the years. Not only did she have hourglass curves with cleavage-popping breasts, but time had matured her face into a stunning portrait of sensual beauty—high cheekbones, sultry doe eyes, and luscious lips that just begged to be kissed. Even her voice—smooth, cultured, with smoky undertones—was sexy as hell.

“My God,” Manning marveled, framing her face between his hands. His heart was slamming against his ribcage, and he couldn't seem to draw enough air into his lungs. “It really is you.”

“And it's really you.” Taylor smiled, her dark eyes twinkling as she gave him an appreciative once-over. “You look amazing, Manning. But then you never were an ugly duckling, were you? Goodness, how long has it been?”

Manning shook his head at her. “Too long.”

Her soft smile held a trace of sorrow. “Over twenty years too long.”

Manning swallowed hard, feeling his chest tighten with emotions that should have been long buried and forgotten. “What're you doing in Atlanta?”

“I'm the artist-in-residence at Emory. I'll be teaching master classes and performing with the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra.”

“Really? That's wonderful, Taylor.” Manning remembered how proud he'd been to learn that she was an accomplished violinist who'd studied at Juilliard before moving to Paris, where she'd been living ever since. “How long will you be in town?”

“Three weeks,” she answered.

Disappointment knifed through Manning. “Only three?”

She nodded. “That's how long the summer residency lasts.”

“Then we've got a lot of catching up to do. Let me take you to breakfast.”

Taylor smiled regretfully. “I'd love to, but I have to be at—”

“There you are,” a male voice interrupted.

Manning and Taylor glanced around to find a tall, fair-skinned man frowning at them, his eyes narrowed with suspicion behind rimless glasses.

“Aidan.” Taylor looked surprised—and a shade guilty. “Why aren't you on your way to the airport?”

“I decided to catch a later flight. Good thing, too.” He glared pointedly at Manning, whose hands had been cradling Taylor's face the entire time they'd been talking.

Taylor discreetly stepped away from Manning and cleared her throat. “Um, Manning, I'd like you to meet Aidan, my—”

“Boyfriend,” the man finished, stepping forward. He and Manning gripped hands, their eyes locked as they sized each other up.

“I'm Taylor's boyfriend,” Aidan repeated, jaw tightly clenched. “And you are?”

Manning slanted a lazy smile at his blushing childhood sweetheart. “I guess you could say I was Taylor's first love.”

And her last if I have anything to say about it....