



# Island Guardian

**Author:** *Regan Black*

**Category:** Romance

**Description:** Two rivals struggle to overcome old hurts to make this marriage of convenience believable...

According to her parents, Trina Bollani needs a husband. They don't care that she's happier than ever managing the Brookwell Island Inn. They just want her with a good man who will bring her home to Italy. And they keep sending over potential grooms to court her. The latest guy on her doorstep? He's her old rival. And her best friend's older brother.

Just looking at Trina annoys Rhett Ellington. She was the thorn in his side in college and now her inn is a direct competitor with his family's luxury properties.

But seeing Trina with his sister gives him a compelling new perspective. When her parents unwittingly send over the man who hurt her deeply, she's vulnerable and Rhett can't ignore Trina's pain. He'll do whatever it takes to make her feel safe, even if that means pretending to be her husband.

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If you like suspenseful romance blended with coastal beach vibes, a marriage of convenience, and a grumpy protector who falls first into a happily ever after, you'll love Island Guardian!

**Total Pages (Source):** 74

# Page 1

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## Chapter One

Carefully balancing a tray of drinks, Rhett Ellington wound his way through the crowded Pelican Pub, deftly avoiding any disastrous collisions. To his visitor's eye, it seemed as if the entire population of Brookwell Island was here for tonight's trivia game.

His sister, Harper, had warned him it would be a crush and—foolishly—he'd shown up anyway. As promised, he hadn't interfered with her team. Hadn't even gathered a team to compete against her, though he'd been tempted. Few things in his life gave him the same immense satisfaction as riling his little sister.

Instead, he behaved himself, hanging out near the dart boards with a few friends of his own—old and new. And when Harper's team had come out on top, he'd picked up this round to celebrate their success.

Reaching the booth, he set the tray down. Three women eagerly claimed glasses of wine, leaving behind his bottle of beer and a white wine spritzer. Their fourth, Trina Bollani, had left the table sometime between his taking their order and returning with it.

He fought against an urge to be offended. She generally didn't care for him much, but by some tacit agreement, they managed to be civil for Harper's sake. He wasn't sure exactly when or how Harper and Trina had become best pals, but it was already obvious the woman would be a permanent member of his sister's inner circle.

Everyone in the pub was buzzing about the success of Harper's team. With good

reason. So far this season they'd won every match. Between them, there was plenty of brain power, and quite a diverse collection of life experience, no matter which members of the group showed up.

Tonight, Harper and Trina were joined by Nina Reynolds and Lila Upton. Nina and Lila had been raised here on the island, and both owned businesses on Central Avenue.

Even though Trina hadn't returned, he raised his beer and toasted the team. "Congratulations!"

It wouldn't kill him to repeat the gesture when she came back to the table. This entire endeavor had been an effort to show Harper that he could be warm and friendly, even toward the woman he considered his nemesis.

Trina was a lot of things, most of them good, to an objective observer. If asked, even he would agree she was an asset as the manager of the historic Inn on Brookwell Island. Unfortunately, he struggled to maintain an impartial detachment for more than a few minutes at a time.

He was grown, with a list of accomplishments to be proud of and yet, a glimpse of her could still toss him back to his college days. Specifically, the year he and Trina butted heads during an elite hospitality internship in France. It had been an unparalleled pressure cooker and she'd shown him up at every opportunity.

And if he shared those stories with his sister, she would only call him petty and tell him to grow up. Rhett couldn't remember the last time he was in the mood for such a lecture.

"Where is Trina?" he queried.

Although the drinks were definitely to celebrate, he also hoped to get some feedback from the four women on some special package ideas designed to cater to a girls' night out crowd. He wanted to create options that would draw more locals to the Ellington Cove resort he managed in Key West, Florida along with all-inclusive packages that would make the resort an enticing destination for long weekends or full vacations. As hospitality professionals, he could knock around ideas with his sister anytime, but he'd heard Nina often planned "girl weekends" for her friends. He'd like to get more insight from the customer viewpoint to help him fine tune the package details and price points.

Harper glanced around. "She's probably caught up in a conversation."

Seated across from them, Lila looked around that area of the pub for their friend. "Everyone has taken a shine to her and wants her to feel at home," Lila explained. "We probably pester her too much when she's out living her life."

Nina laughed. "I don't regret a thing. She's finally come on a couple of girl weekends," she explained to Rhett.

"And we all know how those go." Lila grinned like the Cheshire cat with valuable intel.

Rhett was clearly missing the inside joke, but he didn't push. He was thrilled to see his sister so happy.

The trivia team flexed a bit from week to week depending on kids, husbands, and other commitments. From what he'd heard, Harper and Trina were the anchors of the group, showing up consistently to have fun and test their knowledge against whatever topics the host came up with.

He couldn't remember the last time his sister had been this relaxed. And good for her,

developing a true friendship with Trina after seeing each other infrequently as kids when their parents got together.

He nudged her with his elbow. “This island looks good on you.”

“Thanks.” She beamed.

He always assumed his little sister had a big social life. Until ugly recent events proved him wrong. Still unsettled over how far off he’d been about her life and happiness, he made an effort to visit more, despite his commitments to the family interests in Key West. That meant hanging out in the greater Charleston area along with plenty of time here on Brookwell.

Fortunately, his team down at the Cove was the best. They worked well and made good decisions without his constant presence or excessive hand-holding. And he had the revenue numbers to back him up if anyone questioned his schedule or methods.

For years now, he and Harper had competed to show the best profits at the quarterly meetings. No one was handing out trophies or actually keeping score—other than the two of them. The friendly rivalry was mostly fun and everyone benefited from their consistently innovative ideas.

“I’d like to say the same for you.” Harper kept her voice low. “But I’m half-afraid you’re only here to get an inside track on the Inn.”

“That’s not it.” But admitting he wanted to stay close to her and the rest of their family only opened him up for more concern.

She scowled. “I don’t know how many times I have to tell you it’s not going to come up for sale. Especially not with Trina at the helm.”

## Page 2

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Of course it wouldn't. The Inn management was structured differently. Trina answered to a community board. Every indicator pointed to her being their best and favorite manager to date. He was certain she was incapable of failing such an important responsibility.

He tried to keep his long-standing irritation in check. Naturally, Harper saw right through him. "Get that look off your face right now," she scolded. "Whatever your issues are, Trina is incredible and more importantly, she's a good friend."

"Heard," he assured her. "And that's not why I visit." He gave her his best smile. "You are."

She reared back. "You're serious." At his nod, she cocked her head. "I'm fine. Things are great. The wedding plans are humming along."

"Fabulous news, all around." He raised his beer to her. "To your continued happiness."

"You're up to something," she accused.

He rolled his eyes. "I'm not," he promised. "Did I interfere? I didn't even gloat when you guys missed that one question about the Florida Panthers hockey team."

Harper turned her drink in her hand. "Maybe this is one glass of wine more than I needed," she said, giving him plenty of little sister side eye. "Maybe we should implement a no-boys allowed policy."

“You’re mean.”

“Am I?” She batted her eyelashes with pseudo-innocence. “You must’ve taught me well.”

Laughing, the four of them chatted while he sipped on the beer, waiting on Trina. But she didn’t return. In fact, he didn’t see her anywhere in the pub. He didn’t like it. Something felt off. Maybe he was jumping at shadows and growing paranoid after Harper’s recent troubles.

More likely it was a side-effect of hanging out with Guardian Agency protectors at the boxing gym in Key West where he liked to train. Those men and women shared plenty of tales of assignments and heroics, filling his head with all the potential problems in any normal situation.

He didn’t look at the world with the same kind of trust anymore.

As a kid learning the family business of hotels and hospitality, he’d believed hotels were non-stop fun. Once he was older, he realized there were plenty of pitfalls and many people abused hotel stays, indulging in activities they would never consider doing at home. He still remembered the shock of tagging along with his dad for a meeting with the attorneys. What an eye-opener that had been. He’d immediately understood the heavy responsibility of dealing with the public.

He wasn’t a big fan of his grim world-view these days. Had to be careful not to turn jaded or pessimistic. But the facts were there. Ugly stuff happened to good people.

“Let me text her,” Nina offered. “If someone is monopolizing her personal time it’ll give her an excuse to escape.”

Rhett took a breath and sat back. He was too restless. If he stuck around, Harper

would pick up on it and pester him until he gave a satisfactory answer. Not a fun prospect, since he didn't have one.

Probably best if he headed out and found a different group of women to interview about their travel preferences. "No worries," he said. "Just make sure she gets her drink." He slid out of the booth. "Y'all take care and have a good night. Congrats again."

He walked back to rejoin his future brother-in-law, Knox, who had conned Nina's husband, Boone, into another game of darts. Looked like Knox was still kicking butt and taking names.

"I'm heading out." He tossed what was left of his beer into the trash can in the corner.

Knox shot him a wary look. "What's on your mind, man?" he asked as Boone stepped to the line for his turn.

"Nothing that wouldn't spoil the mood," Rhett replied.

"Don't you ever stop thinking about work?"

Rhett snorted. "You're one to talk." When Boone's darts were clustered near the center ring, Rhett gave bothmen a fist bump and went to the bar to pay his tab. Feeling generous, he also covered the tab for the trivia team.

And still no sign of Trina.

Unable to ignore his instincts any longer, he decided to track her down. He couldn't explain why he was suddenly so desperate to know she was okay, but he didn't fight it. At his car, he slid into the driver's seat, but didn't start the engine. He called the Inn and asked to speak with her.



The young woman who answered politely asked him to hold while he was connected. He shook his head. Rookie move, he thought.

Trina should know better than to be available for calls twenty-four-seven. As the operating manager of a major resort, Rhett had specific office hours. If Trina was smart, she'd have the same boundaries to safeguard her time. Of course, she managed an inn on a touristy little island, so maybe he was comparing apples to oranges.

"Trina Bollani, how may I help you?"

Her voice sounded a little rough around the edges. "Hi." Suddenly, he was at a loss for words. He shouldn't have made the call until he'd known what he wanted to say. "This is Rhett Ellington."

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“Mm-hm. Yes?”

Had her voice cracked? Where was she? “Um, yeah.” He cleared his throat. “I just wanted to check on you. No one seemed to know where you went.”

“You... What?” Her voice trailed off.

He couldn't blame her for being confused. His concern didn't make sense to him either. They weren't friends, but lately he'd been trying to get along better for his sister's sake. As their interactions grew, he found himself increasingly eager for the next time he'd see her. It was the strangest thing and not entirely comfortable to discover Trina was a fascinating woman and an expert in her field.

In the brief silence while he floundered for a reasonable reply, the rhythmic pulse of the waves meeting the shore registered. What was she doing out on the beach in the dark?

“Forgive me for disappearing,” she said, her tone way too formal now. “I got a call. Family. I'll send the girls a text and let them know I'm okay. Thanks for checking in, Rhett.”

He looked around. Like so many places on the island, the Pelican Pub wasn't far from beach access.

“You're not okay.” He got out of his car and locked the door. “Where are you?”

“I beg your pardon.”

The prim, indignant tone in her voice should have warned him off. She was an adult. Her displeasure didn't put him off, he'd adjusted to it during their year of study in France. All they'd done was irritate and annoy each other.

"What's going on, Trina?"

"That's really not your business." She sniffed. "It's a personal issue. Thank you for checking on me. Good night."

He stared at his phone. Swore. She'd ended the call.

Challenge accepted.

He glanced around, having no idea what kind of car she drove. For all he knew, she'd walked over from the Inn. He scowled. The streets were too dark at this hour for that kind of nonsense. Combined with the strappy little sandals she'd worn tonight, he dismissed the idea. Those weren't walking shoes.

And he should not have any ideas about Trina's footwear. She was not a friend. And though she helped his family, she was not family. Unless Harper had designs on adopting her, the way she had seamlessly folded her college roommates, Hannah and Sonya, into the Ellington family. He closed his eyes for a beat.

Those two women were definitely his sisters after more than a decade of sharing Christmases, countless brunches, and dozens of other events through the years. Something deep inside him rebelled at the idea of Trina joining their ranks. Now wasn't the time for a deep analysis of that feeling.

Pushed by a persistent concern, he was jogging by the time he reached the nearest beach access and the boardwalk that spanned the dunes.

His feet sunk into the soft sand and he looked right and left. And then he spotted her, several yards away. She stood at the water's edge, facing the dark waves under the glow of a pink moon.

## Chapter Two

Trina was doing her best not to add her own tears to the ocean of saltwater lapping at her bare feet. Crying wouldn't change anything. Her problems would still be looming over her head and she'd have puffy eyes and a headache to make matters worse.

Besides, she wasn't sad. She was one of those people who teared up when her temper got the best of her. It had taken years of deliberate effort to gain the self-control necessary to overcome the reaction. But she'd done it—gladly—to become the kind of manager a hotel staff could trust to stay cool under pressure.

Professionally, she was a rock. Most days she'd say the same about her personal life. Her parents however, were stubbornly set on an outdated view of their daughter. They regularly praised her beauty and critiqued her uneven emotions. Of course, they hadn't spent much time with her since her year studying in France led to more opportunities to work around the world.

She nearly stamped her foot thinking about the last time she had a tantrum. Doing so would actually be a tantrum, ending a streak she'd carried for over a decade. Not that anyone else would know.

No one was out here to witness her meltdown. She wished that made her feel better or safe enough to indulge. This was a public beach in the town where she worked. In the town where she wanted to stay for many, many years.

Brookwell was home and she loved it. Adored the job, the people, and her lovely new friends. Reconnecting with Harper had been a particular high point. She twisted her

foot into the wet sand—not a stomp. She would not be giving up any of it, regardless of her parents outrageous interference in her life.

How to make them understand?

Her parents didn't seem to remember that she had gone away to school in France and aced the program. She'd run circles around her peers—excellent students all. Including Rhett Ellington. Her stellar reputation continued to grow and open more doors. She wasn't ready to give that up in the name of marriage and motherhood.

Especially when there wasn't a significant other on the horizon, much less in her life.

Her single status somehow fueled their persistent effort to marry her off to a man of their choosing. Someone to father babies they could dote on and spoil rotten.

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Outrageous. Wasn't she more than a broodmare? She curled her toes as the foamy ocean sucked the sand from under her feet. She loved her life. Why couldn't they get on board and give her more time?

She wasn't ready for marriage on demand. Definitely not ready for motherhood. A tear escaped, rolling down her cheek. She knuckled it away.

"Trina?"

Startled, she jumped and turned. Feeling caught and guilty with it, when she recognized Rhett she settled on being annoyed. A woman should be able to cry by herself on a beach. Especially on a night with a pink moon soaring overhead. "What are you doing here, Rhett?"

Why did such an irritating man have to be related to Harper, a friend she found so wonderfully supportive and inspiring? At the moment, it was merely more evidence that the universe was laughing at her attempt to live her life on her own terms.

He stopped short and tucked his hands into his pockets. "Didn't mean to intrude." He sounded as if he was chewing glass. "I was concerned."

"You called."

"Yes." He dipped his chin in a short nod.

"And I told you not to worry."

“You did.” He didn’t budge. “Do you want me to go?”

Of course she did. She was out here—alone—for a good reason. Her lips parted to shoo him away and then her phone buzzed in her hand. Glancing down, she saw yet another text message from her mother.

Suddenly the obvious answer was much less so. She was tired of facing this nonsense from her mother on her own. But it was Rhett and she wasn’t sure he could be supportive during her personal crisis. “Go or stay, it’s up to you. But I am okay.”

“Do you remember in school when we had to back up our theories with concrete plans or tangible results?” he asked.

Because everything with him came back to that year in France. “Being okay is not a theory,” she pointed out.

His head tilted, as if he was consulting the moon for the best answer.

She followed his gaze, admiring the unique beauty of moonlight on the water. In a perfect world that would be her sole reason for being out here. Enjoying a clear night on the beach, soaking up nature and basking in the glowing inspiration before heading home to bed.

Belatedly, she seized the obvious distraction.

“This is the first time I’ve seen the moon this color,” she said. “Does it happen often?”

“Probably happens more often than we notice,” he replied with a shrug.

She wasn’t so sure about that. “I disagree.” Because of course she did. Finding the

opposing side of any issue was a reliable and comforting pattern between them. “Look at it. That’s hard to overlook.”

“You never saw a pink moon in Italy?”

She shook her head and one of her curls tumbled loose. She tucked it behind her ear. “Pink skies, yes, but not the moon. Not in France either,” she mused. Although, she hadn’t taken much time for anything outside of the curriculum during that year. Her singular goal had been to excel and earn top marks to increase her professional options. “Nowhere else. This is my first.”

“Mine too.” His reply resonated, as if that were significant.

She was a hot mess, waxing on about some atmospheric anomaly when she had real problems to sort out. On cue, another alert sounded from her phone. She nearly tossed the thing in the ocean just to be done with all of it.

Except that felt a little too close to tantrum-behavior.

“Still okay?”

“No.” Now she’d done it. Tossed out her shocking honesty, as big and strange as the pastel-colored moon overhead. “I will be,” she hedged. “You don’t need to involve yourself. In fact, as a point of compassion, I urge you to walk away now.” She flicked her fingers, hoping he would take the hint graciously.

Naturally, he didn’t. He closed the distance until he stood at her side. In silence. No judgment, no unwelcome opinions. She wasn’t sure she had ever seen this side of him.

Her phone hummed yet again. Why couldn’t her mother take a hint? She swore under



her breath and Rhett chuckled.

Like her, he probably knew how to curse in a dozen languages or more. One of the perks of working in hotels that catered to world travelers.

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She moved back from the tide line, away from the wet packed sand, and plopped down on her backside. The sand would be hard enough on her dress, she didn't want to return to the Inn with a damp backside as well.

"Fine," she confessed when he followed. "I'm not okay and it's terribly embarrassing."

She had definitely hit a new low if she was ready to spill the entire mess to this particular man. This wasn't a simple business dilemma. Well, not entirely. And she was so frustrated. Handling it alone had been one failure after another. For a woman used to winning, it was dreadful.

Rhett was an idea man. Maybe he could help her find a solution. She certainly hadn't found one on her own.

"My parents have been sending over qualified men." She put those last two words in air quotes. "They are determined to marry me off this year." Plus, they'd made it clear that until she married a man they approved of, she wouldn't get her full share from the family business. Yes, it was her birthright, but she hadn't been sure the strict conditions were worth it. Now, with the next man due to arrive any day, she didn't care if they cut her off entirely.

Rhett sat down in the sand near her. Not close enough to touch her, yet his presence crowded her, invading her personal space. She would've sworn she felt the heat from his body.

Worse, she seemed to be enjoying it.

“Harper and I were commiserating over the situation before she got engaged to Knox. And with our fathers being such good friends, suddenly they’re convinced they know just the kind of man I need.”

Rhett frowned. “But my dad didn’t set up Harper and Knox.”

“I’m aware. The timing is the issue. My parents are convinced my biological clock is ticking and with all the focus on Harper’s upcoming wedding...”

“Oh.”

“Exactly.” She was grateful she didn’t need to spell it out in all the gory detail. “I like Knox,” she mused. “It was my understanding that he would’ve been the last person anyone would choose for Harper.”

Rhett grunted. “Guess it’s good she got to choose for herself.”

That observation struck too sharply. “Well, I think they’re good together.”

“Harper’s happier than I’ve seen her in years,” he said. “That’s what matters.” He leaned back on his hands. “It’s been years since I’ve spent any time with your parents, but this kind of pressure seems out of character. Are you sure they’re serious?”

“I am.” She swallowed against the sting of more tears. “Two candidates have already come and gone. The third will be here in a couple of days.”

He sat up. “What the hell?”

She jerked at his sudden outburst. “You were at the Inn the day the first one arrived.”

The shadows only added drama to the scowl on his face. “I need more details.”

“The first week your family had brunch at the Inn,” she said.

“Hang on. You’re talking about that guy who was following you around like a lost puppy? I thought he was an intern. His suit was too tight. Definitely over-tailored.”

She gaped at him for a beat and then cackled. “Antonio. He’d be dreadfully offended to hear you say that.” She pressed her fingers to her lips, but another giggle burst free. “Oh, but it’s simply the best. I want to tell him so badly.”

“Because you want to offend him?”

“Yes. Desperately,” she admitted. She sat up on her knees, scooted closer. “Antonio is one of the most condescending men I’ve met in my life. He’s a vice-president of something or other in the family management company.” She tucked a wayward curl behind her ear. “He was shocked that America hadn’t turned me into a troll. I can only imagine what my parents told him,” she muttered. “For three days he trailed after me giving me tips to improve our systems and efficiency.”

Now Rhett laughed. Turning toward her, he propped one hand on his knee, curling his fingers into a fist. “I was so annoyed that weekend after the arson issues at the resort, having my family turn to you for help. I stalked around town, primed to jump into a fight with anyone. Not the most constructive outlet outside of a boxing ring. If you’d given me a sign, I would’ve taken him down a peg or two.”

This was a side of him she’d never seen. “If only I’d known,” she said with dramatic wistfulness. “Somehow, I managed to dissuade him all by myself. No fighting required.”

“Too bad for me.” He laughed. “Was Bachelor Number Two more of the same?”

“Yes. He literally did a double take when he saw me.” A pinch around her heart couldn’t be ignored. “My parents mean well.” She had to keep believing that or give in to despair. “They have no idea how our generation thinks. They don’t realize that by recruiting men to date me, those same men assume there must be something wrong with me that interferes with my romantic pursuits.”

Admittedly, she did have some specific trust issues that kept her single. But she liked her life. Unlike her parents, she wasn’t convinced marriage was necessary for a life to feel complete.

“Pursuits? You sound like someone who stepped out of the past. Who talks like that anymore?”

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She deflated a little under the pointed criticism. “I’ll take it under advisement.” Old world vocabulary aside, she wasn’t comfortable dating, no matter who introduced her. She’d never told anyone her reasons—and didn’t plan to start now. She’d been working on her problems, she just hadn’t solved them yet. “I’ve asked them for more time,” she murmured. Parental pressure wasn’t helping matters.

“What’s the rush?”

She shrugged. “My mother is the only one of her friends without grandchildren. She thinks I’m too focused on my career and wants me to have balance. According to my dad it’s all about retirement. They want to hand the management company over to a?—”

“Good Italian boy?” he finished for her.

“Yes.” Not her. Not by herself at any rate and that stung. Deeply.

“Why didn’t Bachelor Number Two work out?”

She flicked a hand. “That was more of a mutual decision. He was nice enough.” At least on the surface. Appearances could be deceiving, and she’d been fooled before. “There was no chemistry,” she said, seizing on an excuse Harper had supplied when they’d chatted at the time.

“Because?”

“Pardon?”

“Why wasn’t there any chemistry?”

Why was he pushing her? Possibly for the same reason she seemed to be sharing so much. “He’s gay. He assumed that I was too and, like him, had reasons for keeping that private. He thought we could marry each other and keep our secrets along with our true loves. Especially with my career so far away from Italy.

“Now though, I wish I’d done it,” she muttered.

“Married a man who wasn’t interested?” Rhett whistled. “One way to defy your parents. But this whole mess is absurd. Want my dad to talk to them?”

The Ellington siblings were good friends. “Harper suggested the same thing a while ago.” She shook her head. “What’s the point? They see me as their pudgy awkward daughter who works because there’s nothing else to do.”

“You could date anyone,” he declared.

“Please don’t,” she warned. She didn’t want platitudes, not from a man as handsome and accomplished as Rhett.

“You’re lovely, Trina.”

She snorted. He couldn’t be serious. Rhett was the man who’d glowered at her through their entire year of study in France. Although she might’ve started it by turning to others for that first team project. At the time, she was all-in on her own goals and he was so carefree, almost lazy.

Until she’d started winning every challenge.

“Referring to my professional personality, surely.”

“I’m not. You could have your pick of men.”

“Hm.” Where were these compliments coming from? Harper wasn’t here to see him making the effort. He was being too kind and she couldn’t afford to let her mind wander. “I should’ve picked Bachelor Number Two.” She fiddled with her phone. Maybe if she called him now...

“Why would you settle for an illusion, when that’s not what you want?”

He had no idea what she wanted. Correction: he didn’t know what she needed. She’d heard the rumors about his active dating life. All the sexy fun, none of the commitment. Which didn’t bother her, he was welcome to choose whatever made him happy.

“Because then this would be over,” she said. “Over and done.” She swore in her native Italian. “Really, Rhett, these issues aren’t your business.”

She needed to go back to the Inn and do whatever she could to brace herself for the new arrival. “Thanks for checking on me.” Standing, she dusted the sand from her dress. “Good night.”

“You’re scared.”

It wasn’t a question, though she treated it as one. “What are you talking about?”

“Bachelor Number Three,” he clarified. “You’re scared of him.”

She counted on the moonlight and shadows to conceal her shock. He didn’t know her well enough to reach that conclusion. She felt a moment’s panic that he’d somehow learned her terrible secret. But that was impossible. She didn’t speak of it outside of therapy.



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“No,” she said firmly, finding her voice. “I’m a grown woman. I have nothing to be afraid of.”

“I beg to differ. Over the past year, I’ve started boxing at Max’s gym. A local place,” he explained before she could ask. “Boxing is a great workout. A bunch of Guardian Agency security folks train there too. They’ve shared plenty of stories that contradict your theory.”

“How... unpleasant,” she decided. Of course she knew the world was dangerous, but she wouldn’t be a victim again.

“Trina.” He stepped closer.

She backpedaled before she realized what she’d done. “Let it go, Rhett.”

“Let me help you.”

He couldn’t—short of marrying her before this next prospect showed up. “Let it go,” she repeated. Her parents were set on this for her. They wouldn’t be easily stopped until they had their way. Though their outlandish and pushy efforts annoyed, she’d been sure she could tolerate the nonsense and graciously defer any decisions until she found a way to make them listen.

But Luca Gallo? She shivered. She hadn’t dreamed they’d send him. How had he even wormed his way onto their potential-groom radar?

“I’m fine,” she fibbed. “Good night.” She turned away from the moon and gazed up

to the velvet darkness of the stars twinkling above the trees on the western side of the island. Better that than dwelling on the sexy shape of Rhett's chiseled profile.

"Did you walk all this way?"

"I did. It's not so far." He made a ten minute walk sound insurmountable. "And the weather's clear."

"It's dark," he countered. "I'll drive you back."

She didn't see much point in arguing. "Would that make you feel better?"

"Yes."

Instead of heading down the beach toward the access closest to the Inn, she aimed for the access across from the Pelican. "Tell me, are there any American legends about finding Mr. Right under a pink moon?"

He snorted. There was no misinterpreting that sound. She hadn't really expected him to be informed or enthused about romantic myths. "I'm only teasing."

"Do you want to get married, Trina?"

The words struck her wrong. The syllables bunching up and then stretching out. He couldn't mean... "Is that a proposal, Mr. Ellington?"

His jaw dropped. "No, I mean..." he tipped his head. "No. But not because of you. It's me."

"Goodness." She forced a laugh. "You're giving me the 'it's not you, it's me' talk and we haven't even gone out a single time. That must be a new record." Trina had

never actually been on the receiving end of that particular break-up conversation. Mainly because she didn't go out with anyone long enough for it to qualify as a relationship.

The soft, dry sand shifted under her feet, an echo of her general unease with her predicament. As she mulled what Rhett had said, ignoring what he meant, a wild idea began to take root. Marriage was an excellent option. If she was married, her parents couldn't randomly interfere anymore. Couldn't shove more arrogant, disinterested men at her. No more startling text messages about another potential groom arriving to ruin a fun evening.

If she married, they'd either accept her choice of husband or not, but she could stop living with this obnoxious cloud hanging over her head.

Of course, there was no sign of a willing groom nearby. Did she need a real groom or would a stand-in be enough of a deterrent? She had to do something, because Bachelor Number Three would be here in a few days. And nothing filled her heart with more dread than that man.

It hadn't always been that way. Their families had been close and once upon a time she'd considered Luca a good friend. Her parents had always considered him the consummate example of a self-made man. Despite the tragic deaths of his parents, he'd worked his way through university, graduated with honors, and immediately landed a prestigious position. Since then, he continued to impress important people as he climbed the corporate ladder, gaining more influence with every upward move.

Though she applauded his accomplishments, Trina suspected she was the only person in the world who didn't admire him.

He represented every bad decision in her past. If she'd made different choices—smarter choices—he wouldn't even be on the short list of ideal sons-in-law.

Since her falling-out with him, she'd chosen her battles poorly. Tacitly agreeing with the wealth of praise that always accompanied the mention of his name. Keeping the pain he'd inflicted locked down, out of sight, where it only hurt.

Rhett's non-proposal aside, maybe he could help her devise a cover story and a reason to be out of town until Luca gave up and went back to Italy. Would he be open to an impromptu cross-training exercise like the ones they completed in school?

She stopped a few paces from the boardwalk so they wouldn't be overheard. "I've been thinking of taking some time off. Maybe enrolling in a refresher course of some kind," she began.

"Wouldn't you need to clear something like that with the board?"

"I have a generous leave package and an excellent staff."

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“Hm. What do you have in mind?”

She scrambled for a viable idea. “Could I shadow your wedding consultant for a few days?” she asked, sticking with the theme of the night. “Brainstorm with her a bit?”

In the deeper shadows away from the moonlight, it was hard to read his expression, but she felt a shift and his tension was palpable. “You want to hide from Bachelor Number Three,” Rhett guessed. “It’s that or steal my wedding coordinator.”

“I’m not about to poach your staff.” But she absolutely wanted to hide. “And it’s only a little hiding.” She downplayed the truth. “It’s not his fault my parents have convinced anyone who will listen that I’m eager to marry and balance out my life.”

Rhett mumbled an oath. “He’s at fault if he shows up only to fulfill their scheme.”

“Are you defending me?” Surprising, considering how little he thought of her. If only his oddly phrased question earlier hadn’t left her yearning for a real proposal. From Rhett or any other decent man.

“I guess I am.” He grinned at her, the expression she hadn’t expected her heart tripped and thudded in her chest. “A surprise to both of us, all things considered.”

His candid assessment made her laugh. “I was never trying to embarrass you in France,” she said.

“Spare me the kind thoughts and gushing praise. You are the most competitive creature I’ve ever met.”

“That can’t be true,” she protested. “You grew up with Harper.”

He snorted. “Compared to you, she’s downright agreeable.”

“Ha, ha.”

“Seriously Trina, you earned every win,” he said. “I didn’t like it and I was a sore loser, but you were the one who came up with creative solutions every single time.”

“Thanks,” she murmured, overcome by his candor. Hard memories and painful emotions swamped her. Losing would’ve meant going back home. Although she hadn’t been able to articulate it at the time, that kind of failure would have destroyed her.

She went above and beyond in the internship to give herself better opportunities. Winning in France granted an immediate reprieve as she moved into an elite position in London. She leap-frogged from London to post after post, returning home for the shortest possible breaks, until she landed here.

“I really love this job,” she said, wistful. “If my parents manage to send over someone I want to marry, I’ll have to leave this behind.”

The awareness dragged at her, melancholy threatening to set in with every heavy beat of her heart. It felt like a crime against herself. It definitely went against her professional goals.

“There’s no chance one of the good Italian boys will support your career goals?”

She appreciated the concern, even if it did come from Rhett. “It’s a longshot. The goal is to get me back into the nest. Anyone who might be open to my plans wouldn’t mention it. Why risk a free trip to the States?”

“You don’t believe any of them are truly interested in you?”

She shook her head. “Not a chance. Put yourself in their shoes. A wealthy couple with a single daughter is willing to pay for your trip across an ocean. They can’t help but be in it for free travel at the very least. No one’s coming because they know me or want me.”

Maybe that wasn’t entirely true. Luca would show up soon, but the man didn’t know her at all. Especially not after so many years.

“You make a fair point.” Rhett’s voice rumbled over her skin. “For what it’s worth, I’m sorry. I wish there was more I could do.”

So did she. “You’re headed back to Key West soon, right?”

“In a few days.”

She sensed he was restless, though she didn’t know the cause. “Is there a problem you’re avoiding?”

“No, of course not. The Cove is great. Family is great. The properties here are great.”

“Then why do you sound miserable?”

He rolled his broad shoulders and even in the moonlight the movement affected her, making her warm in places she shouldn’t think about in public. Although, right here, they were entirely alone. The ocean was still louder than the ambient sounds of island life. It was easy to forget herself and she was liking that anonymity a bit too much.

“Maybe your mood’s rubbing off on me.”

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“Aren’t you the king of charm,” she quipped. He was right, of course. But that kernel of a wild idea died flat. There was no way she could ask Rhett to play a role as her boyfriend or fiancé while Luca was here. She might have his respect, but not his affection.

It was silly to think of him helping her that way and a thousand times more embarrassing to voice such an inane idea. She had to get out of here before she humiliated herself.

“We should go. I need to get back.” Her staff deserved a head’s up about another potential groom. “Thank you for checking on me.” She walked closer to the steps spanning the dunes.

“Trina.” He reached out.

Flinching away, she stumbled backward, bracing for the hard landing and the humiliation that would surely follow.

But she didn’t land hard in the sand. Somehow, Rhett caught her and she found herself steady and snug against the heat of his chest. She inhaled the scent of salty ocean air layered over the clean, masculine scent of his skin. Potent, enticing, and gone too quickly. As soon as she was steady—a miracle considering her knocking knees—he released her, hands loose at his sides.

The scowl on his face now sent a shiver down her spine. “What happened? Give me a name.”



She didn't recognize the rough timber of his voice. This was not a side of Rhett she'd ever seen before. "Wh-what are you talking about?" she stammered under his hard glare. "Don't be silly."

"Was it Bachelor One or Bachelor Two?" His gaze narrowed. "One," he declared. "You said Two prefers men."

"Stop this." The incident that left her scarred wasn't even in this decade. "Why do you think it was anyone? I'm just in a mood. You said so yourself." She scrambled up the steps and across the walkway, rushing for the street.

His longer stride closed the distance. "My car is this way."

So much for hoping he'd forget her agreement to let him drive her back.

He opened the passenger door for her and paused until she lifted her gaze to his. "Let me help you." He held his ground, keeping the door open without crowding her.

She gave him bonus points for restraint. "There's no dreadful problem. I'm clumsy and edgy, that's all."

"That narrows it down to Bachelor Number Three. The man you want to avoid."

"Please, get in the car."

He relented, closing the door gently and rounding the hood. When he was situated in the driver's seat, she said, "You need to stop worrying. I don't need a hero, Rhett." And if she did, she wouldn't choose a man who excited her the way he did.

She preferred unattainable men. Guys so far out of her league or so far removed from her current geography that she couldn't get scared.

That was her ideal type. Over the last few months, Harper had been trying to pin down the characteristics Trina found most attractive in a man. As if having a definition would somehow force her parents to back off. Unattainable was top of the list. She didn't want to go out with anyone for more than a couple dates. Didn't want to get close emotionally knowing she couldn't reciprocate physically.

She had no trouble with innocent, friendly banter or flirting. She could be charming. Those skills were part of the job she adored. For short stints, she could even enjoy herself and be the life of the party. But one-on-one intimacy? Not in her wheelhouse. She was already a disappointment to her parents. There was no reason to involve innocent and unwitting good boys from Italy.

But after one unexpectedly pleasant conversation, Rhett already suspected the truth, demanding names and puffing up like he would take action in her defense.

"Okay, no heroics," he allowed. "You could talk to me anyway."

"We're not friends," she stated. Although telling him wouldn't change anything. Discussing that incident outside of her therapist's office would be the worst. She'd rather walk across a bed of nails.

"We should probably try. That's the main reason I've been visiting so often."

Her heart kicked. "For Harper," she realized. He hadn't been coming up to see her.

"Yes." He gave a mighty sigh. "Tell me what's going on. Please," he added a beat too late.

"Haven't I painted a clear picture? My parents are being jerks. That's the beginning, middle, and end of the story."

“I’d like to help,” he said, slowing to make the turn into the staff parking area near the Inn.

She was about to decline—politely—when her cell phone chimed with another text message. If it was her mother... But this message was from Jacob, one of her assistants. He regularly handled the registration desk overnight.

“Oh, God.” Her stomach twisted into a knot and she fumbled with the door handle, desperate to get out in case she got sick.

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Rhett called her name, his voice a tinny sound through the pulse pounding in her ears. “Talk to me.”

She stared at him over the top of his car, afraid the tears threatening would spill over any second. Blinking rapidly, she stifled a miserable groan. “Bachelor Number Three just checked in.”

### Chapter Three

Whoever this guy was, he wasn't welcome in Trina's life. It might not be his place to make that decision permanently for her, but she was freaking out tonight. Rhett couldn't walk away while she was so distraught.

Scenarios flooded his mind—none of them pleasant—that explained why her parents might not know anything about how much this guy upset her. But it stopped now.

“Is he waiting in the lobby?”

“No.” Her curls swayed as she shook her head. “Jacob messaged that he went up to his room.”

“Good.” Rhett resisted the urge to touch her. She looked so fragile. “Let's get you home.”

He ignored the now-familiar tingling response in his fingertips. This wasn't the time to face his highly-inconvenient attraction to her. They'd just gotten good at being civil. And of course, she'd reached that milestone first and with far more grace.

He took a step toward the Inn, but she remained frozen near the car. “I’m not sure I can do this,” she whispered.

He returned to her side. “You’re not alone, Trina.”

Her eyes were big and glossy as she looked up at him. “Rhett. I-I...”

“We can go somewhere else. To Harper,” he said, inspired. “She can meet us at the resort or downtown. Whatever you need.”

When her phone chimed again, he was tempted to smash the damned device. She checked the message, swiping away the tear that spilled down her cheek. “This is my home,” she stated. Her chin lifted. “I won’t be chased away.”

The defiance was a good sign, but he wasn’t comfortable leaving just yet. “Can I walk you in?”

“Please,” she said with feeling.

Rhett knew enough about hotels to avoid the public areas without any instruction from her. Her steps were brisk as they crossed the parking area and went in at the kitchen entrance. She greeted a couple of people as they passed, her smile wobbling only a little. From there, he easily located the service elevator. They rode up to her floor in silence.

Her steps were quick as she dashed down the hall to her door. He would’ve said good night right there and promised to check on her in the morning, but she pulled him inside.

“Can you stay?” She threw the main deadbolt, a u-lock, a second deadbolt, and two more sliding locks. One at the top of the door and one at the bottom. “Just for a

minute. I know it's an imposition."

He wondered what maintenance had thought of that request. The extra locks and her nerves nearly broke his heart. She'd been through something terrible that left her scarred. Something she hid from the rest of the world. He was ready to charge out there and slay dragons for her. Anything to chase the fear and insecurity from her normally warm gaze.

"I'm here as long as you need me." He tucked his hands in his pockets and looked around the suite she called home.

She turned from the door and dropped her keys in a shallow glass bowl on the stand. "This is it," she said. "Would you like a drink?"

"Water is fine."

"Okay. Good." She scooted by him and into the kitchen. "Help yourself to the nickel tour."

Just back from a tiled-floor entry, he stood in the main room, an open-concept space much like any other luxury hotel suite he'd visited through the years. Not too different from his own place at the Cove in Key West.

The light over the stove had been left on and a lamp with a stained-glass shade glowed on an end table near the couch. Everywhere he looked he saw her personality. Little touches of Trina showed in the warm bold colors and vibrant patterns where he'd expect to see a more neutral design choice.

A round table with generous seating for four served as her dining room. The table wasn't hotel standard. Although the surface was scarred, when he touched it, the wood was silky under his fingertips. "Tell me about this table." He met her gaze

across the island that separated the kitchen from the rest of the space.

“Oh, sure.” She carried glasses of water for each of them. “It was my grandmother’s,” she replied. “Nonna insisted on shipping it to me when I landed this job.”

He drank half the water in his glass. Her affection for her grandmother struck him square in the heart. If they had anything in common, it was respect for their family heritage. “That’s thoughtful.”

“She sent some other things too. Including a set of everyday china.” She gestured to the kitchen cabinets behind her.

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“Everyday china?” He’d never heard the term.

“It’s a thing.” Her normal smile teased her lips. “I’m sure your mom or aunt could fill you in.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Filed under topics that could divert a conversational disaster at brunch.

“We don’t have to stand around.” She waved an arm toward the seating area. “Make yourself comfortable.”

A deep leather couch was placed across from the television and he had a vision of her curled up watching movies. Several throw pillows in those vibrant hues were scattered across the couch and on two low-slung barrel chairs. “You have these in the lobby,” he said. “Near the bar.”

“Good eye.” She smiled at him as she tucked herself into one end of the couch. “They’re so chic and cozy at the same time.”

He considered the opposite end of the couch and chose the barrel chair closer to her spot instead. “Are you going to fill me in?”

Her mouth twisted to the side and she traced the condensation beading on her water glass. “I owe you an explanation.”

“No, you don’t.” He eased forward when her head snapped up and her gaze locked with his. “Share or don’t, I’ll do whatever I can to help you.”



“I’m really not comfortable talking about it,” she admitted. “Bachelor Number Three has a name, Luca Gallo. We grew up in the same general neighborhood. Until university. Then I went to the program in France. My parents think the world of him.”

“You don’t.” Gallo frightened her, that was obvious.

Her lips flatlined and she shook her head. “He’s not a terrible person.” Her voice seemed to shrink, contradicting the claim. “Just not the man I want to marry.”

“Telling your parents isn’t an option?” He wasn’t suggesting she tell them she didn’t want a husband right now. He was referring to whatever Gallo had done.

Because he’d done something.

“I’ve tried.”

He was certain she meant she’d tried to call off the parade of would-be grooms. “What can I do?”

“Honestly?” He nodded. “Help me find a husband.” Her gaze fell to her hands. “It’s the only solution I can think of.”

He sat back. “A preemptive strike?” The idea had merit.

“Yes.” She uncurred from the couch and color came back into her cheeks. “In name only. I don’t need it to be real. Or permanent.” She nibbled on her full lower lip. “Can you think of anyone willing to do something so strange?”

He had good friends who would gladly step up as a fake husband to help her out. For a few days, maybe a couple of months. And suddenly he hated them all. They’d be spending time with her and getting to know her better. They’d get her smiles and

wacky humor. And he'd be left on the sidelines, watching her.

"Whoever helps me," she continued, "we could make up a story about eloping or going to the courthouse. I've been private enough here that the staff wouldn't contradict a secret-romance story. No one would ask to see the paperwork."

"You're wrong about that," he said.

She tilted her head. "Which part?"

"The paperwork for starters," he replied. "Everyone we know would want evidence, especially your parents."

"You have a point..." Her voice trailed off. "Hold on. We?"

"Yes." He eased back in the chair, doing his best to appear relaxed, almost careless. "You and me. Why don't I step into the role?"

"But—"

"Our dads are friends, we've crossed paths growing up." He was warming to the idea. "You landed here. Marrying me will make more sense than you suddenly marrying someone they've never heard of. Besides, the Cove has a reputation for perfect weddings, no matter how big or small."

"That's all true, I guess." She shivered. "Harper is envious of your wedding planner."

"As she should be. Are you cold?"

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“No.” She rubbed her arms. “It’s a lot. What you’re suggesting,” she clarified. “My parents would be thrilled to have me become the newest Mrs. Ellington.” She folded her arms over her chest. He worked to keep his gaze on hers, rather than on her cleavage. “But your parents?—”

“Will be delighted I’m marrying at all,” he finished for her.

“Wrong,” she said, echoing him. “They’ll think I’m taking advantage of your generous nature and using you for citizenship or something.”

He snorted. “Generous nature? That doesn’t sound like me at all.” She didn’t look convinced. “Besides, I’ll explain it to them eventually. When you don’t need me anymore.”

“Rhett, this isn’t a game. You can’t.”

“I can. Agree to marry me and Bachelor Number Three?—”

“Luca.”

“Whatever.” Rhett didn’t want to speak the name of the man that clearly caused her pain. “We do this and he’s no longer a problem for you.”

“But you don’t want to marry me.”

Yesterday, she might’ve been right. At the moment, the idea had way more advantages than pitfalls. “Probably no more than you want to marry me,” he agreed.

“That doesn’t mean it’s not a smart solution.”

Exasperated, she rolled her eyes. “Look at us. No one would believe it.”

“We’ll be convincing.”

She grimaced.

Did she find him so unappealing? “Do your parents know?”

“About what?”

“Whatever it is you don’t want to discuss about Gallo.”

She shook her head. “It’s my issue,” she muttered.

“Do you have any confidence that they’ll eventually find a man you are interested in?”

“I don’t have any intention of marrying at all,” she confessed.

“Me either.” He’d never admitted it aloud before. “I’m not dating anyone. There’s no one who might get hurt if we do this. Come on. It’s the best way to protect you and put an end to the nonsense.” The best way to shield her from whatever scared her about Gallo. “I guess you could just hire a bodyguard. You have the contacts.”

“I don’t need a bodyguard,” she stated firmly. “I shouldn’t need a husband.”

He swung over, perching on the coffee table, his knees almost touching hers.

“Nothing about this sounds fair. I get it. But your idea has merit.”

“With someone willing to fake it,” she protested. “Not with you.”

“I’m a great actor,” he lied. “Plus, I’m a known quantity. You need someone reliable, someone you can count on to help in the short-term and walk away when you give the word.” He tapped his chest. “That’s me, Trina. I can be that friend for you.”

“Why would you do this, Rhett? You hate me.”

Mostly at the moment he hated himself for allowing a few months of hard competition to get under his skin. He’d been immature and overconfident during their year in France. He hadn’t exactly been skating—his parents would never put up with that—but he’d been sure he knew all the answers in the hotel industry.

Trina had put him in his place and constantly losing to her had inspired him to become better at his career. Now he was the idea guy in the family. Recently, other operations sought his expertise on think tanks or consulting gigs. “I’ve never hated you. My ego got the better of me, that’s all. I’ve grown since then.”

He resisted the urge to touch her. He extended his hand, palm up. “It’s your choice, Trina. However this plays out, it will always be your choice.”

He waited for her to say or do anything. Just as her lips parted, a knock sounded at her door. “Did you order room service?”

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“No.” She carefully scooted across the couch so she could rise without touching him. He deliberately chose not to be offended. “And before you lecture me, the staff doesn’t contact me after hours unless there’s a serious problem.”

At the door, she pressed up on her toes to look through the peephole. Whoever she saw out there, she lurched back. “It’s him,” she whispered.

Gallo. He steadied her then looked for himself, taking stock of the man in the hallway holding a bouquet of flowers.

“Trina?” he called. “I’m here, my darling.”

Rhett gritted his teeth and turned to her. “Want me to take the lead?”

She nodded, her eyes wide and her hand curling around his arm. He wasn’t sure she realized she had a hold of him. Regardless, he’d work with it, use it to her advantage. He opened the door, delighted to see Gallo’s slick smile fade into shock.

“Hello?” The man tried to summon a pleasant expression as he addressed Trina. “My darling, how are you?”

“Hello, Luca.”

“We weren’t expecting you,” Rhett said.

“I’m early.” Luca glared at the way she clung to Rhett. Recovering, he held out the flowers. “For you, la mia bellissima ragazza.”

“She’s not your girl,” Rhett replied. He smiled at her, “Though, I agree, she is beautiful.” He accepted the flowers on her behalf. “Go on in,” he suggested as casually as he could. “Those need water. I’ll be right there to finish packing.”

Her eyes widened briefly at his blatant implication. “Thank you. Grazie.”

“You won’t invite me in?” Luca wheedled, craning to see around Rhett, but she was already out of sight.

Rhett stepped into the hallway and the door closed with a snap. He could only hope she didn’t lock him out along with Gallo. Then again, he didn’t want her at risk if things turned ugly out here. “How did you find us?”

“Us?” His dark eyebrows drew tight over an aquiline nose. “No, no. This is Trina’s home.”

“How?” Rhett folded his arms over his chest.

Gallo was tall and lean, all sharp edges and angles emphasized by his expertly tailored suit. Rhett figured he dressed up after checking in, because there wasn’t a wrinkle in sight. He had not flown from Italy in that suit.

“This is between Trina and me. Please excuse yourself.”

“Not happening.”

“Who the hell are you?” Gallo snarled.

Ah, here was the real man, now that Trina was out of sight. He stuck out his hand. “Rhett Ellington. You are?”

“Luca Gallo. Friend of the Bollani family.” He puffed up his chest. “Soon to be Trina’s husband. If she’ll have me. Her parents have given me their blessing.”

“How nice for you.”

“She must have told you of my arrival.”

“Rings a bell,” he allowed. “You’re early. We weren’t expecting you for a few more days.”

“And yet, a room was ready.”

That proved nothing. “That’s kinda the point of a placelike this,” Rhett said. “How did you find our door?” Rhett pressed. “There’s no marker.”

“Her mother gave me the information.” Gallo’s chin notched higher. Did the man have any idea what a tempting target it made? “How else would I call on her?”

Rhett let the silence hang there between them. “All right. You’ve delivered your flowers, she’s aware that you’re here. Good night.”

“I’m not leaving without speaking to her.”



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“She didn’t seem so keen on talking to you. And we’re headed out. So... Bye.” He pasted a patently false smile on his face and waved.

“Who are you to her?”

“I don’t believe that’s any of your business.” He didn’t bother with any posturing, simply held his position there in front of Trina’s door. “You need to leave this hallway. Now.”

Gallo took a slow step back, then another, headed for the stairwell.

“Mr. Gallo?”

He glanced back over his shoulder. “Yes?”

“Donotreturn without a direct invitation.”

Gallo’s dark eyes flashed with temper and then he stormed off.

Rhett knew the reprieve wouldn’t last. The man was slick and way too sure of his success. They needed to move quickly if they were going to outmaneuver him.

He rapped softly on the door. “Just me. I’m alone.”

## Chapter Four

Trina’s heart was pounding. She’d listened to the entire exchange. Now that Rhett was

alone, she yanked open the door and hauled him inside. Once the locks were secure, she leaned back and stared at him. Part of her wanted to throw her arms around him and hug him, the other part wanted to stay curled up in a ball.

“I can’t believe you did that.” A flash of temper shook her. “Can’t believe my mom told him where to find me.”

“You’re welcome?” Rhett stood there, hands in his pockets, watching her too closely.

“Yes, thank you.” She pushed away from the door, sliding around him. “I’m being ridiculous.”

“Were you afraid for me?”

Was he smirking? She couldn’t be upset, he’d earned it. If only it were that simple. “Not really.” She waved a hand at him. “Look at you. You can clearly hold your own. I’m sorry.”

“No need to apologize. He upsets you and he’s a jerk for not backing off.”

“Yes and no.” She grabbed her water glass and went to the kitchen for a refill. “He doesn’t really know how much he upsets me. I haven’t seen him in years.” Because she did her best to avoid any chance of an interaction.

But what now? Luca had actually done it. He’d come all this way to... Marry her. “He really said it.” The glass fell from her fingers to the tile floor and shattered. She swore as shards of glass and cold water went everywhere.

“Hold still,” Rhett directed.

As if she had the capacity to move. Nothing about this was right. The broken glass

was the least of it. This was her life.

Angry tears threatened again. She had to pull herself together. Had to get out of here, though she didn't want to change jobs. The Inn was perfect, she'd made real friends.

She'd listened at the door. Luca didn't sound as if he'd be easily dissuaded.

It dawned on her that Rhett had found a broom and paper towels and was handling the mess as if he really lived here. "Sorry. I should do that. I can."

"Stop apologizing." Crouched at her feet, he glanced up. "Of course you can, but I'm almost done."

Her emotions had dragged her up and down over the last few hours. Rhett was being a friend when she needed one. "Thanks. Wh-why would they give their blessing?"

Standing, he carried the mess to the trash can and dumped it in, the broken glass tinkling. After another pass with the vacuum cleaner, he said, "Stay put. You've got a couple of scratches."

She glanced down, too lost in her tumultuous thoughts to have noticed. The bleeding wasn't severe, but enough to track over the floor if she tried to get to the first aid kit on her own. Stubbornness was no reason to make more work for either of them. "Mounted to the inside of the pantry door," she said, pointing.

He found it easily enough and slipped the kit out of the bracket. "This is a smart idea."

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“I’ve been known to have them.” When it came to business anyway. As he worked, she studied the sun-bleached highlights in his short blonde hair. “Thanks for the help,” she said as he finished up.

“My pleasure.”

He returned the first aid kit and lingered there. “Think you’ll be able to travel?” he asked, dipping his chin toward her feet.

He had told her to pack. “Where am I going?”

“Key West. For some cross training with Ilsa, my amazing wedding coordinator.” He smiled. “And to get married, if that still solves this for you. Either way, you get a reprieve to decide how to handle Luca. I told him we were on our way out.”

“You also said this was our place.” She trembled again, as she’d done the first time. Not out of fear, but something closer to anticipation. What was wrong with her that she was considering such a crazy option?

He nodded.

“The staff will tell him the truth.” She moved around the opposite end of the island and back to the couch. “That I live here alone.”

“Are you sure? From what I’ve seen your staff adore and respect you. And I’ve been in town more frequently.”

With his sister, but yes, he made a good point. “Maybe. But he can be pushy.” Worse than pushy, although again, only her therapist knew how she felt about that night.

“Well, if we go, you’ll be pushing back. On your terms,” Rhett said, sinking into the chair closest to her. “He knows he’s here ahead of schedule.”

And why was that? Not that she cared enough to ask directly.

“Trina?” He held out his hand once more. “Let Gallo cool his heels while you do what you want.”

She stared at his offered hand. Strangely tempted. What onEarth was she thinking? “I’m definitely in on the whole wedding planner shadowing. But the other?—”

“Getting married.”

Count on Rhett to be direct. “Yes.” She swallowed. “If we’re married, people will expect us to be close, um, affectionate. In public.” That wasn’t her, not anymore.

He shifted, taking that outstretched hand with him. “You held my arm when Luca showed up.” Had she really? “Whatever we do in public is your choice,” he continued. “Every marriage is different. You’ve seen enough couples to know that.”

True. “Our marriage would be more than different.” For starters, it would be fake. She had zero confidence about ever being a true wife to anyone. Suddenly she realized this sketchy plan was little more than a sandcastle washing away with the tide. “You work in Key West. I have to be here. We aren’t going to convince anyone that we’re really married.” An unconvinced Luca with her parents’ blessing would keep pressing until she admitted the truth.

And that would backfire spectacularly. She could imagine the tsunami of phone calls

and messages filled with her mother's distress and her father's disappointment.

"I have an idea if you're game," Rhett said.

He was the idea guy. "Do tell?"

"You come away with me to Key West for three days, tops. Officially, you'll meet with the best wedding planner in the business. While we're there she can handle our wedding. I'll send her an email while you pack."

"Tonight?"

"Do you really want to deal with Gallo in the breakfast room tomorrow?"

Her stomach twisted. "Of course not."

"When we return, we'll share the news with friends and family. I'm sure even Gallo will raise his glass to toast our whirlwind romance."

Romance? As if she would ever be able to pull that off. "I don't have a dress or?"

"Ilsa knows what to do and how to make it happen. She knows where to shop."

"A long-distance marriage? Will anyone in your family believe that's what you want?"

He shrugged. "I can stay here and work remotely. I can commute to the Cove as needed until you're ready for a divorce." He reached out once more. "Marry me, Trina. It's a good solution, but ultimately it's your decision."

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She couldn't remember anyone in her personal life ever offering her that much power or control. It was a heady sensation. Before she wasted another second overthinking, she pressed her palm to his.

His fingers curled oh-so-gently around her hand. A simple gesture that somehow made her feel seen and heard and...Valued. He didn't squeeze or tug. Didn't try any nonsensical gestures like kissing her knuckles.

"Thank you." Gratitude pulsed through her. Warming her and giving her hope with every beat of her heart. She stood and he released her. Missing that contact was a weird new sensation. "I'll go pack."

He rolled to his feet and the smile he gave her felt softer than usual. "I'll get things rolling with the plane and with Ilsa."

Another wave of warmth coasted through her before she darted to her bedroom. When she factored in the way she'd automatically latched onto him earlier, tonight marked the most personal physical contact she'd experienced with a man in years.

It was as lovely as it was remarkable.

### Chapter Five

While Trina packed,Rhett called the charter service to arrange for the flight to Key West. He also sent the email to Ilsa Crosby. After apologizing for upending whatever was on her schedule tomorrow, he added several specific requests. Trina would need an engagement ring, a dress, and all the other details that would make the day fun and

memorable. He offered up a few suggestions, but trusted Ilsa's expertise.

Despite this sudden, giant whirlwind of change he wanted Trina to have something more memorable than a few minutes in front of a judge.

Of course, everything needed to be legit and as convincing as possible. Having full documentation to share when they were ready for the announcement was essential. Formal photos, a videographer, probably a ceremony out on the water, officiated by the captain of the boat was the easiest solution. Tomorrow should be an event Trina would thoroughly enjoy, even without her family or friends in attendance.

An event she could look back on fondly, once she didn't need Rhett around anymore.

He had no illusions that her family would be happy theyeloped. He expected he would pass muster as a son-in-law, but her mother would be upset over being left out of the wedding day. Hell, he might even need his dad's support to convince his new father-in-law that this wasn't an unmitigated disaster.

Though Ilsa was the soul of discretion, he asked her to keep quiet about this development around the Cove. He didn't want his staff peppering him with questions or smothering Trina with panic-inducing enthusiasm upon their arrival. With luck, they could exercise some control over how and when word got out about their wedding.

He filed all of that away in the back of his mind. Tonight he just needed to get her to Florida without any additional stress.

Expecting Ilsa would tell her husband, Max, owner of the gym Rhett favored, he invited his friend to join the consult tomorrow afternoon. He'd like to get Max's opinion on steps he could take to manage any issues Gallo might stir up.



As a Guardian Agency protector, Max Crosby had provided security to globe-trotting, high-profile celebrities prior to settling in Key West. Now, he and Ilsa enjoyed a quieter, more geographically stable life as he provided new-hire training programs for Guardian Agency recruits as well as refresher courses for established protectors.

When he opened his gym, Rhett's curiosity won out. Impressed, his first visit had led to a regular habit. He enjoyed the physical challenges, felt better than ever, and consistently met interesting people outside of his typical circles. He'd been raised to get along with just about anyone—part of growing up in the hospitality industry—but the gym kept his meet and greet skills sharp. Not to mention the insight into security issues along with a constant flow of intel on travel trends and preferences.

"I'm almost done," Trina called from the bedroom.

He checked his watch. "Take your time."

Eager as he was to put some distance between her and Gallo, they had about an hour before the plane would be ready. If Gallo chose to be a problem, Rhett preferred to deal with it here with security guards ready to back him up.

At the sliding glass door that opened onto her balcony, he stared out into the night, contemplating how different life would be after their trip to Key West. They would soon be sorting out how to make her suite a home for both of them.

Just as he turned to explore the rest of the suite, Trina emerged from the bedroom with a rolling suitcase at her side. She'd changed clothes and he did a double take. The dress, deep blue with a lighter aqua pattern, reminded him of rolling ocean waves. The fabric hugged her curves and an unmistakable ache welled up inside him. Her smile was vibrant, almost glowing. He looked closely for any signs of strain or doubts and came up empty.

“You look incredible.” He sensed his plan backfiring already. He was attracted to her and she was worried about being able to show enough affection to make their relationship believable. Too late. He was committed and he refused to let her down.

“Thanks.” At her hesitation, he lurched into action, taking her suitcase to the door. “Do we have a minute for me to order a replacement for the glass I dropped?”

“Sure.”

“It probably seems silly.”

Her gaze on her phone, he took full advantage, drinking her in. “Do what you need to do. Was the glassware included with the dishes your grandmother sent?”

She glanced up. “Yes! Nonna gave me six place settings, complete with glassware and all the fussy extra dishes no one knows what to do with, so I could entertain.”

He smiled. Her nonna reminded him of the aunts. “And do you entertain?”

“Occasionally.” Trina’s soft laughter floated through the room. “Nina insisted. We’ve had fun, though I don’t do the formal dinners Nonna probably had in mind.” Suddenly her big brown eyes widened and her gaze darted around the suite. “Will we need to entertain as a couple?”

“Possibly.”

He took a step closer before he caught himself. Already his first inclination was to offer her comfort. The attitude shift was so strange, and yet somehow, exactly right. Still, he didn’t want her assuming he’d demand more physical contact than she was ready for, so he held his ground.

“If something comes up, you have an entire Inn to work with. We don’t have to host anyone here.”

Her shoulders relaxed. “Sorry, I’m all over the place tonight. I don’t mean to overreact. You’re free to change your mind about all of this,” she said, gesturing at herself.

If that was supposed to indicate she was some kind of turn off, she was doing it all wrong. Probably not the best time to mention it. He recognized doubts haunting her gaze now. “I’m in. Until you tell me to go,” he reminded her.

The glossy black curls framing her face swayed as she shook her head. “It’s just—” She glanced at the door and her suitcase, then back to him. “This is such an extreme imposition.”

He shrugged. “For both of us, right?”

Her mouth opened and snapped shut. The smile that followed was slow and shy. “I hadn’t thought of it like that. I guess it is.” She studied him. “Why are you doing it?”

He checked his watch, tipping his head toward the door. “We need to get moving if we’re going to make the plane.”

“In a minute.” She took a deep breath, drawing his attention to her full breasts. “Please, Rhett. I don’t want to make you miserable. Make either of us miserable. Tell me, you’re sure.”

“I’m sure.” He spread his arms. “You need an ally. I’m available and happy to step up.”

Her smile grew. “You’re very strange.”

“Is that a compliment?”

“It wasn’t an insult.” She waved him over. “Let me show you the rest of the suite before we go. If you have furniture or things that will make you comfortable,” she continued, “I’m happy to make room.”

He glanced around. “I like what you’ve got here.” She’d created a warm and inviting home. “I’ll need a place to work. Nothing elaborate. We can confiscate an extra table or I can order something.” He wasn’t picky. His top priority was her.

He followed her away from the central living area, turning down a short hallway. He’d known the suite was in the corner of the building, but he was surprised to see a full bathroom on one side and antique French doors on the other.

She pointed to the plain door at the end of the hallway. “The back door. Exits straight into a service hall.”

“For sneaky getaways?”

Her nose wrinkled. “Let’s hope not.” She opened the French doors and stepped back. “I use it as an office now. Do you think this would suit you? As a dual-purpose office and bedroom, I mean.”

“I can definitely work with this,” he managed.

This close, her scent was distracting—sweet, warm spices enhanced by the salty ocean air. It reminded him of being a kid and running around during the big Thanksgiving dinners at his grandparents’ place across the river on Sullivan’s Island.

“When we get back, I’ll move my things to the bedroom. The daybed in here is new, but we can move it out and request a roll-away bed if you prefer.”

He managed not to cringe at the thought of sleeping on the daybed indefinitely. But she hadn’t taken this step because she wanted to marry him for real, only to protect herself. “Requesting a roll-away is likely to blow a hole in the happily married vibe we’re going for.”

“Oh, right.” She took a breath. “Well, the wi-fi signal is great throughout the whole place,” she added. “And if you want a different desk, that’s no biggie.”

The desk reminded him a bit of the table her grandmother had gifted her. “This one isn’t from your family?”

She shook her head and tucked her hair back behind her ears again. “It was in storage. With the Inn’s history, there are plenty of styles and eras to choose from.”

His fingers itched to touch her, to outline the shape of her full lower lip or follow those glossy locks as they curled around her ear. Her habitual movement was such a small thing, and still he found himself wishing he had the privilege of doing it himself.

He could almost feel the heavy silk of her hair sifting through his fingers, brushing over his bare skin as he held her close. Down boy. That was getting way too far ahead of the situation.

“We should go,” he said abruptly. “We can discuss this on the flight. Whatever we decide, I want you to be comfortable too.”

Her soft humming sound of agreement rippled across his senses. Not the time to get distracted. He took her suitcase and she grabbed a sweater, her purse, and her keys from the bowl.

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“Why don’t you have a key card?” he asked, watching her lock up. “Wouldn’t that be more secure?”

She laughed. “Hardly. Guests frequently get turned around up here. After a few weeks of folks trying to open my door, I had a regular lock installed and the card reader disabled. It’s been a perfect solution. Now, even if someone tries the card reader, it doesn’t light up or make any noise so they return to the lobby immediately. I’ll make sure you get a copy of the key.”

“Great, thanks.”

“You don’t have that problem at the Cove?” she asked.

He punched the call button for the elevator. “Not at all. Then again, my suite is well-removed from public access. A guest would have to be pretty lost to stumble across my door.” He caught the way her eyes lit up. “Have you considered moving off-property?”

“No.”

The reply, flat and firm, left him wondering about the story behind it. Someday, when she trusted him more, he hoped she’d explain. He wouldn’t push her for answers now.

The elevator opened and she turned toward the lobby rather than the employee parking area. “I just want to speak with Jacob for a second.”

“Lead the way.”

She hurried down the hallway and around the corner, stopping so suddenly he nearly plowed her over.

“Finally!Grazie, Jacob.Grazie!”

Rhett swore under his breath, moving to block Gallo as he stormed toward Trina. “I’ve got this.”

She gave a squeak and reached for his hand. “This is unexpected,” Rhett said. “I thought I’d made myself clear.”

From the front desk he heard Jacob apologizing to Trina. “He asked me to call, but I wouldn’t. I told him you weren’t available.”

“It’s fine.” Still gripping him as if her life depended on it, she pressed herself to Rhett’s side, keeping him and the suitcase between her and the “good” Italian boy. “I’ll call you from the car, Jacob.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“We’re on our way out,” Rhett said to the man blocking their path.

“No, no. I’m here now. The plan must change.” He aimed a pleading look at Trina. “Your mother, she is so happy. She asked me to take a picture.”

Happy over what?The man was a well-dressed, deluded pain in the ass. It was tempting to tell him they were engaged. Rhett barely remembered that he wanted to control the narrative, not let this guy spread the news.



He didn't dare look at her, but he was sure Trina was on the brink of either a breakdown or a furious outburst. Neither option appealed. As a professional, he understood that she'd view either outcome as a failure. They were in a public area of the hotel. A welcome guest might pass by at any moment.

"We have a plane to catch," Rhett snapped. "You'll excuse us." He turned, tucking her in front of him and ushering her in the other direction. "Keep moving." He pressed the car keys into her hand. "Straight to the car. Get in, lock the doors."

"Sir!" Gallo chased them. Because that's just what Rhett needed. "I must speak with Trina."

At the exit, Trina rushed out into the night and Rhett turned abruptly to put a stop to this. "You're embarrassing yourself," he said, his voice lethal and low. "Don't care much about that. But you're making her uncomfortable and that I won't tolerate."

"We are friends. Destined for?—"

No way. He was not going to listen to some sappy and inaccurate declaration. "Tonight you are friends, full stop." Rhett would clear up that misunderstanding later. "Right now, we have a schedule to keep. You showed up early. Your problem. Her professional schedule was set and cannot be changed at the last minute." He crooked his finger, inviting Gallo closer. "If I could make a suggestion?"

"Yes?"

"Enjoy the town. Take a walk on the beach." Rhett barely resisted a sucker punch. "And go home. Her career is the priority, not you."

Gallo reared back, and maybe he sensed the violence Rhett was ready to unleash. "You do not understand. I'll wait. Arrangements have been made. Trina and I will

speak when she returns from... Where are you going, Mr. Ellington?"

"Continuing education," he replied. It wasn't even much of a lie if he factored in Ilsa.  
 "Good night."

He jogged to the car, pleased to see Trina waiting in the passenger seat, buckled up and ready to go. Her suitcase was in the back seat. When he reached the driver's door, the lock clicked open and he quickly settled in behind the wheel.

“All good?” she asked.

“As good as it gets tonight.” He put the car in gear and drove out of the lot with a control that belied the temper simmering in his veins. “I told him we were headed for a continuing ed deal that you couldn’t cancel.”

“He’ll be here when we come back.”

He hated the grim resignation in her voice. “Probably.” At the corner, he paused to give her a reassuring smile. “But when we come back, you’ll be Mrs. Ellington, making whatever Luca Gallo wants irrelevant.”

He took tremendous satisfaction in the way that reminder perked her up.

### Chapter Six

Trina did a few rounds of calm and restorative breathing as Rhett drove away, leaving Brookwell behind. “I shouldn’t let him scare me. I mean, I know I’m safe.”

Of course that wasn’t what bothered her most. She was angry that her parents had given Luca what amounted to her home address. The whole reason she didn’t live off-property was that she felt safer inside the Inn. She pulled out her phone and opened the messaging app, only to put it away again.

“More texts?”

“No.” She looked down. “I’m turning off my personal phone.” She shoved the device

deep into her purse. No more interruptions from well-meaning parents. “Jacob can reach me on the business phone if he needs me.”

“So you can set boundaries.”

“Yes.” Wound too tightly, she needed to dial down her ire and aim it at the right target. Rhett had been miraculously helpful. Just whisking her away to Key West for a few days could be enough to deter Luca. They might not need to marry after all. “Jacob forwarded your call earlier because he knows you’re a friend.”

Rhett snorted.

“You’re disputing the status?”

He shifted a little in the seat, drawing her attention to his shoulders, down his arms to his hands on the steering wheel. She couldn’t recall ever being this attracted—enthralled—by a man’s arms before.

Of course, she’d kept anything remotely resembling desire in lockdown mode for ages. Especially if the temptation was within reach.

“Wouldn’t you?” he challenged.

“At one time, maybe,” she admitted. She changed the subject, trying to keep her emotions from running amok again. “You said your suite in Key West isn’t accessible to guests?”

“That’s right. You should do the same here.”

“Never thought further precautions would be necessary.” Her parents hadn’t told the first two men where her room was located. “Besides, I can’t expect them to build a

wall or anything when the next manager might need a different setup.”

“You have plans to move on again?”

Was that concern in his voice? “Not at all. I hope to stay forever.” She tried to laugh, but the sound was garbled. “Just don’t tell my parents I said that.”

“They seriously expect you to take over the family hotel?”

“Worse.” She sniffed. “They want me raising their grandchildren while my husband runs the management company. That’s why they sent Antonio first.”

“Unfair.”

She relented. “It would be if I was interested in taking over the company some day.” She’d mostly gotten over that offense. Mostly.

“Would you be more inclined to go home and step into your inheritance if Luca wasn’t nearby?”

A question she’d never bothered to consider. “I don’t know.” She’d been focused on staying single, secure. Out of Luca’s reach.

When her voice trailed off, Rhett let her think, embracing the quiet as he drove on to the airport. It was an easy silence, though he was sure she wasn’t thinking easy thoughts.

He checked the mirrors as they drove, still edgy and braced for trouble.

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Gallo was definitely a threat to her peace of mind, even if he had no intention of deliberately harming her. The man's absolute certainty about marrying Trina was an unpleasant frustration. Like a sandspur he couldn't pluck free.

As if becoming Mrs. Gallo was a done deal she only needed to accept. Why would her parents assume she'd cooperate? For that matter, why were they being so pushy about this at all? They should be proud of her accomplishments. Her independence and success should be celebrated. Why were they so sure she needed to marry to be happy?

Yes, the aunts and his mom had been applying some not-so-subtle pressure about him settling down, but they'd never do anything as drastic as send him prospective brides. There had been jokes about inviting eligible women to the family brunch, but they were only jokes.

Well, it wouldn't be an issue for her much longer.

"You probably know all about the Inn, growing up in the area," Trina said.

"A little," he admitted. "Our parents brought us out here for beach weekends, but we'd rent a house."

He didn't mention the way he'd studied every facet of the Inn's colorful history. The highs of celebrities booking quiet getaways here in the 1940s, followed by the sad years, when the building sat empty and fell into disrepair. He let her tell him everything she'd learned as he drove to the airport, discovering those old stories anew through her enthusiasm.

“This is the last place I thought you’d land,” he said. “Back in school, I assumed you were destined for bigger places.”

She sighed. “Back in school, I assumed the same thing. And I’ve invested years in bigger operations.” She smoothed her palms over her thighs, around her knees and up again, lacing her fingers together in her lap. “Landing this job felt like winning a marathon after working all over Europe.”

“America was that important to your resume?”

“That would be a convenient answer,” she allowed. “I wasn’t ready to go home and...”

When her voice trailed off, he glanced over. He was sure her mind had drifted to Gallo. “Swim in the family pool?” he supplied.

She did a double take and then burst into laughter. “Yes, exactly that. I understand the importance of our business and the legacy my parents intend to live on for generations to come. Some days I feel guilty for wanting something for myself.”

He was shocked that they had that in common. Though he was completely content making his mark within the family through innovative planning and keeping an eye for smart expansion opportunities. The way his parents structured their business, there were plenty of challenges to keep him invested and interested. Unlike Trina, he didn’t feel smothered by expectation or responsibility.

“Do you ever feel that way?”

The tentative tone, so unlike her, caught him off guard. Then again everything about tonight was a steep learning curve. He glanced over, saw her hands still tightly woven in her lap. “You know it doesn’t bother me if you talk with your hands.”

“Pardon me?”

He started to reach for her and caught himself just in time. “Your hands.” He squeezed the steering wheel. “You’ve always been exuberant. It’s a compliment,” he added in a hurry. He decided to take a chance. If they were going to be married, it was best to be as candid as possible. He wanted her to be herself. “Lately it seems you’ve been trying to rein yourself in. You certainly don’t need to change that habit for me.”

He would bet his shares of the Ellington Cove that Bachelor One or Two had mentioned it. During his recent visits, he’d noticed her making an effort to dial it down. “You should never apologize for being yourself.”

“Who are you and what have you done with the real Rhett Ellington?” she asked on a burst of bold laughter. “You were always trying to boss me around when we were in school.”

He didn’t like the abrupt pinch in the vicinity of his heart. “I wasn’t trying to change who you were. If I gave you any grief,” there was noifabout it, “it was only in the pursuit of a win.”

She tapped a finger to the corner of her lush mouth. What he wouldn’t give to be that fingertip. Holy cow, he had to get a hold of himself.

“And yet you didn’t win.”

“Not one time. Not when I was up against you. You were impervious. A woman on a mission.”

“Impervious,” she echoed. “I like the sound of that. Are you bucking for an apology?”



“Hell no.”

She did that sexy humming thing again. “To be fair, I’m sure I was terribly obnoxious.”

“We both were,” he said. “We were motivated, then and now. For what it’s worth, I think that’s a bonus for both of us on this particular endeavor.” Marriage. He needed to get comfortable with the word because it would define his life for the foreseeable future.

“How so?”

“With ambition and drive, the sky’s the limit.”

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“True.” She sounded as if she was smiling.

He wanted to reach for her again. Caught himself again. “People like you and me go after what we want. We get things done.” He smiled as he said it, hoping she could hear his sincerity even if she couldn’t see his expression.

“You’re right.” Her voice sounded a little brighter. She held up a hand for a high-five. “Here’s to the problem-solvers.”

He tapped her palm to hers. “Here’s to us,” he agreed.

It was the strangest thing, stepping into her life like this. He had plenty of drive and ambition. Along with an abundance of determination to help her out of this dicey situation. No, she hadn’t shared the full story of her issues with Gallo.

Rhett didn’t need to hear all the details. He was certain that his urge to leap in and help—even taking drastic measures—stemmed from his hours spent with Max and the other Guardian Agency folks. Those training sessions and stories had increased his awareness of how quickly things could go wrong. He was better at recognizing fear.

He couldn’t stand by and let her deal with Gallo alone. Their rocky history didn’t make any difference. Especially not when he’d seen the debilitating fear in her beautiful eyes.

He had the time, means, and compassion to help.

And that was exactly what he'd do.

Soon they'd be in his resort, in a town he loved and knew well. He was already brainstorming how to fill the next few days and the months ahead with good memories.

Their marriage wouldn't be conventional, but he intended to make it remarkable for her.

## Chapter Seven

Trina felt terrible for yawning as they prepared for take-off. Since rushing her out of the Inn, before that really, Rhett had taken charge in a way that surprised her.

Which was dreadfully unfair to him.

She'd been viewing him through an old lens—from their days as college kids striving to top the competition. Logically, she'd known that the brash, impulsive Rhett Ellington wouldn't have been entrusted with a property like the Cove in Key West. And yet, seeing him more frequently around Brookwell, she'd done her best to keep him in that box.

Building a wall around herself to block out any fond feelings or potential friendship was her safest choice. She didn't want to like him. Had been perfectly content to keep him at arm's length.

That plan had gone up in smoke.

He was the last person she might've dared to ask for help. And yet now she couldn't see a way out that didn't involve him.

“If you’re tired you can sleep,” Rhett said. He pointed to another pair of luxurious seats just past the wing. “Those chairs recline to zero gravity. They keep blankets and pillows on board.”

A nap sounded delightful. She was wired and worn out from the emotional churning of the past few hours. “How long is the flight?”

“Just under two hours.” He ducked his head as he fastened his seatbelt.

She couldn’t quite take her eyes off him. His blond hair gleamed under the cabin lights and his hands, strong and sure, captivated her. “I’d rather sit with you.” Taking the facing seat, she secured her own seatbelt.

He smiled. “How long has it been since you’ve taken a charter?”

She had to think. “A couple of years.” She’d gone home for a Christmas holiday and cut the trip short when Luca had been invited as well. “It’s easy to get used to such a comfortable way to travel.”

“No kidding,” Rhett agreed. “Your dad flies himself quite a bit, doesn’t he?”

She grinned, thinking of her father’s joy when he was in the air. “Small planes in Europe, yes. It’s a hobby that keeps him young. He can be obnoxious about it sometimes,” she added.

Rhett’s soft laugh smoothed out her nerves. He was so good at that. Smoothing her out, keeping her calm.

“I bet being a pilot impresses your mom.”

Trina grinned. “You’re right about that. He had his pilot’s license when they met.

I've heard them joke that she only married him for the convenient travel options." She felt like a heel for implying her mother had been so mercenary. "Of course it's not just that. They have a strong relationship and really do love each other."

"And they love you too," Rhett reminded her.

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“Mm-hm. As your sister often says, I do know how lucky I am.”

Which made it all the more inexplicable that she'd never been completely honest with them about her career or her personal choices. Forging her own path, to hell with the wounds she left behind, had seemed like the most proactive option. The most positive as well. Leaving made it easier to keep the peace in her hometown where her parents had to live and work.

None of it felt easy now.

She'd invested in therapy and was proud of the progress that allowed her to push forward with confidence in her career. Most days she didn't even think about the past or the unpleasant incident that sent her fleeing her home and the career her parents had mapped out for her.

She supposed she owed Luca an awkward thank-you. Without his assumption that they were so good together and meant to be, she might not have broken free to find the place where she felt one-hundred percent herself.

The flight attendant came by to check on them. “We'll be in the air shortly.” She was trim and beautiful, with thick salt-and-pepper hair styled into a sleek bun at the nape of her neck. “Would you like a drink or refreshments?”

“Ask for anything,” Rhett encouraged. “Odds are they've got it on board.”

Too nervous to eat, Trina requested sparkling water. Rhett matched her order.

Once they were in the air and the water served, Trina attempted a regular, friendly conversation. “You commute this way a lot?”

He dipped his chin. “Often. With respect to the admin budget,” he said. “Now that Harper’s planning the wedding, I’m spending more time up here. Driving would take the better part of two days.”

“I didn’t think about that.” She rarely thought about travel times, keeping her focus on the Inn and surrounding area. One day, she hoped to travel more and explore the States, but she told herself there was plenty of time for that.

“You’ll see how removed Key West is once we’re there.” He smiled at her. “No one will bat an eye about my commuting periodically. Unless Harper wants to trade properties.” He paused, considering. “She and Knox might enjoy that, actually.”

“Is that something that happens?” As an only child, she couldn’t comprehend that kind of option. She deferred to her parents, following their advice and expectations, for most of her life. They were so used to her cooperation with their plans, they struggled as she tried to carve out her own path.

“Well, it’s an option. Though we’ve never done it, I like to tease her. She loves this part of the country and I’ve always enjoyed going further afield. So it works out.”

“What about when the Ellington holdings expand?”

He shrugged. “We’ll figure it out. I hope we expand, at a smart pace.”

“Your drive and ambition are showing,” she said. Both characteristics looked good on him. There was a glint in his eyes and she was learning it was an indicator of a brainstorm. It was easy to see why his family called him the idea guy.

“Good.” Another smile, this one setting her heart fluttering.

The flight attendant checked in on them, shared the expected arrival time, and left them to their conversation.

“Thank you again.” She loved to fly and normally she’d be completely at ease. Tonight’s flight carried too much emotional baggage. She owed him a better explanation, but she couldn’t quite bring herself to talk about it. “I still can’t believe we’re doing this.”

“Believe it.” He pulled out his phone and whatever message he was reading put a smile on his face. “Things are already in motion. Ilsa has us scheduled for a consult first thing tomorrow morning.” He set the phone aside. “Well, second thing.”

She felt that flutter fall from her heart to her belly. “Second thing?” she echoed. What did he have in mind?

“First, we’ll get our marriage license, and then Ilsa will walk us through our options for the wedding itself.”

“A marriage license?” The butterflies were drowned out by her heart hammering against her ribs. “I thought we were, um...” She glanced around. “Pretending,” she whispered. “Faking it.”

She’d thought they were creating an arrangement they could end easily when the time was right. Yes, he’d mentioned divorce, but she’d figured it was merely the simplest term for what would happen. If they married, legally, that changed things.

Or did it? Her parents would be upset no matter what route she took that didn’t include Luca or another man of their choosing.



“Hey, relax.” He sat forward. “I’ve been making calls, putting things in motion. I think it’s best if we make it as real as possible.”

“Right.” She knew that. Freaking out about it was the wrong response, but she couldn’t seem to pull a deep breath into her lungs. He’d also said she would have a choice. “Why is that?” she squeaked.

His gaze was intent as he stared at her. “Close your mouth. Breathe in through your nose.”

She still struggled, feeling more lightheaded and desperate by the moment.

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“Trina.” He pressed a finger to one side of his nose. “Look at me. Do what I do.” He firmly closed his lips and then inhaled through the one open nostril.

Mirroring him, her breathing slowed down, the tension eased. Her head cleared as her lungs filled and she felt better.

“There you go,” he encouraged. “Keep going.”

She kept it up for another few breaths. “That’s remarkable,” she said at last.

“Learned it from one of Max’s students from the Guardian Agency.”

“Tell him thanks from me.”

He eased back in his seat. “If I see her again, I will.” His eyes were kind when he asked, “Now was that because of me or is it our rushed plan in general?”

Our. Why did she have to get stuck on such a simple word? Every time she turned around, he was making them a team. That was good, and still unsettling.

“Surely, it can be both.”

“True,” he allowed. “Before you ask again, yes I’m all in. No, I don’t know exactly why. But you need help and I don’t do things halfway.”

She understood commitment to a plan, but this was a bit much. “Rhett. A real wedding?”

“Think of it more like a real elopement,” he said. “While you were packing, I decided you should have fond memories when you look back on this experience years from now. Something to make you smile or laugh. And nothing to cause regrets.”

What a time to realize that she’d invited another powerhouse into her life. As if her parents weren’t big enough factors to contend with. And she already had regrets, though none of them were Rhett’s fault.

Top of the list? There was no way the two of them would be married for a lifetime. She wasn’t capable of a real marriage with him or any other man. He deserved better than the purgatory she could offer.

“Trina?”

She scrambled for something to say. On the plane wasn’t the best time to have a private conversation. “You, um, mentioned that public displays of affection would be up to me.”

“Absolutely. But we need more than that. Your parents will keep hounding you if they sense that we’re faking it.” Apparently, Rhett didn’t share her concerns about the crew’s discretion. “They’ll just go right back to pressuring you to marry the man of their choosing.”

He was right. Why try and argue against the obvious? Her palms were damp. “Well, I appreciate your commitment. I assumed we’d just go through the motions.”

“I considered it,” he admitted.

“Not for long,” she said.

He laughed. “You won’t offend me if you call me bossy. In fact, you definitely need

to call me out when I overstep.”

“Not if?”

He shook his head. “Arrogance is a fatal flaw. Anyone in the family will happily confirm it. I assess issues quickly and often make decisions without explaining my thought process. My mom will tell you that’s why no woman has stuck around yet.” A shadow of something flickered across his face, there and gone quickly. “I have a rough track record with simply doing when I should ask first.”

“Duly warned.”

“In this case though, I didn’t want you caught up in a lie.” He leaned back in his seat, resting one ankle on the opposite knee. His fingers drummed on that knee. “I figure eloping will disrupt things enough without making the whole thing a charade.”

Weirdly enough, seeing his nervous energy soothed her. Made her feel as if they really were a team, diving together into the deep end without looking. Getting the marriage license didn’t mean they had to actually marry. Maybe Luca would give up before they had to see this through. As thoughtful as Rhett was being for her, she didn’t want to wreck his life either.

But now they had to discuss the rest of it. She finished off the sparkling water, wishing now she had asked for something stronger. She bit her lip and then released it. In her head, her mother’s voice gave her the all-too-familiar lecture about projecting confident body language.

“In the interest of not lying, are you comfortable with the living arrangements we talked about?” she asked.

“As long as you trust your housekeeping staff not to gossip,” he replied.

She knew they'd have to be careful. Gossip was part of life in any hotel she'd worked at so far. "Do you trust your staff?" she countered. "We're kicking this off at your place."

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He aimed one of those charming grins her way. “Not exactly. But that doesn’t mean I’m pressuring you into anything. When we get to my apartment, just tell me what you need. If we have to, we can set the stage for marital bliss on cleaning days.”

“You and I? Living in bliss?” Frankly she’d been startled they hadn’t erupted into a real argument yet. She figured he was on his best behavior because she’d been so stressed out and shocked by Luca turning up.

“Why not?” His smile softened. “We can practice something new. At least until the timing’s right for us to part ways. Or we can be the couple who argues all the time.” His fingers drummed a faster rhythm on his knee. “Please believe me, Trina. I’m not going to leave you hanging.”

She wasn’t sure what to make of his teasing or his confidence about this whole mess. What to make of him. He kept surprising her at every turn. The kindness astounded her. He was helping with more than ideas. He was sacrificing a chunk of his life. For her.

Swallowing around the lump in her throat, she said, “Thank you. Again. A thousand times thank you.”

Her phone rang and she didn’t even bother to stifle her groan. “My mother. I can’t keep ignoring her.”

“Not even if you’re on a romantic whirlwind trip with your soon-to-be husband?” he asked. “I can’t imagine she’d want to interfere with that.”

“Tip one for marital bliss,” she said, “Accept that my mother will always expect me to answer.”

His rolling laughter warmed her straight through. She’d expected him to grumble, at least a little. “We’re Italian.” The ringing started again. “I’m an only child. Talia Bollani is not wired to let go of the apron strings. I’ll make it quick.” Maybe she’d get lucky and the plane’s wi-fi signal would drop.

“Hey Mom!” She leaned hard into her bright and happy voice. “We won trivia tonight.”

“Is that why you have been dodging my calls?”

She couldn’t look at Rhett for fear of giving something away. “Not dodging. Just out with friends. You’re up really late.”

Her mother huffed. “Hard to sleep when I worry over you. You haven’t returned my messages.”

“Sorry, Mama. I was getting ready to respond.”

“I know when you’re lying,” her mother reminded her.

“Yes, you’ve always had a gift.”

Talia switched to Italian and proceeded to tell her all about Luca’s excitement about his upcoming visit. “He went on and on about how good it would be to see you again. I think he’s half in love already,” she gushed. “He has always cared for you just as you are.”

Trina swallowed the pain at the veiled insult. Sticking with her native language, Trina

made another plea for her mother to call off the arranged marriage nonsense. Maybethis time she'd be heard. "Mama, this is too much. I'm happy and content with my work and friends right now."

"You need to marry. You've had your fling in America. Now it's time to come home so we can talk at a civilized hour. I worry, my darling."

"I know. And I love you." She didn't bother with any of the points that fell on deaf ears in previous conversations. "You should go back to bed."

Her mother swore, complaining about her hot flashes. "If you were married and living here, I could be useful at this hour, getting up with your babies."

Trina forced a laugh. "Enough, Mama. You're plenty useful to me every day."

"Have you met someone?" Her mother demanded abruptly. "You have. I can tell. You're carrying on with an American. A farmer, I suppose. They're all farmers."

"Mama, you and Dad are technically farmers."

"I beg your pardon," Talia screeched. "We are business people."

"Yes. With hotels andorchards," Trina reminded her. She happily blamed this newfound confidence on Rhett. Being close to him unlocked a new boldness inside her.

Her mother sniffed, continuing to deny the accusation. "We are business people with diverse investments and interests..." While her mother droned on, Trina studied Rhett from under her lashes.

The man really was as handsome as sin. Whether he was playing darts with friends at



the pub, walking on the beach, or sitting comfortably in a chartered plane. Living with him was going to be a huge challenge.

How strange that her immense gratitude was increasingly blurred by her physical fascination with him. When she'd put her hand in his and agreed to this outrageous deal, the sizzle had been undeniable. And a direct challenge to the way she lived her life.

For years, she avoided any and all feelings for men in her immediate vicinity. Men who might actually ask her out. She fixed her sights on impossible men for a reason. She didn't want the risks or expectations that went along with a relationship. Despite several good examples of honorable men in her life, direct personal interactions left her uncertain and wanting to shrink into herself. She hated herself for the weakness. She held her own in business meetings and professional interactions with guests, but anything more intimate was a mistake waiting to happen.

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Being almost at ease with Rhett was a wild and wonderful revelation. Although he didn't know the details, he didn't push her. And so far, didn't shun her either. She appreciated his patience more than she could say.

"Trina! You're not listening," her mother accused sharply. "What is happening there?"

"Nothing, Mama. I apologize. What were you saying?"

"Please make Luca feel welcome. You must give him a chance, my darling. Your father and I know what's best for you."

If only that were true. "Thank you for caring so much." Trina switched back to English because it made it easier to sound more upbeat than defeated. "I promise Luca will have a lovely time." Just not with her.

She caught the comically skeptical look on Rhett's face and had to turn away before she laughed in her mother's ear.

"If you saw my texts, you know he arrives tomorrow," Talia continued.

Trina didn't bother to correct her about the early arrival. Neither did she complain about giving out Trina's private suite information. There was no point arguing over what was done. "Yes, Mama. The entire staff is ready."

"Good that you've trained them. Even though it won't be your problem much longer."

Trina let her mother rattle on about her imminent return to Italy. The family home. The traditions. Time and again she'd explained the contract she had signed, how much she loved the position, and how much she adored South Carolina. None of it changed her parents' view. Of course they had good intentions, but she wished they would listen.

"Forgive me, Mama," she cut in when Talia paused for breath. "I need to go. I'm being rude to my friends."

"Of course, of course. Your friends. Introduce them to Luca when he gets there."

She rolled her eyes. "Yes, Mama. I promise." With the exchange of "I love yous", she ended the call. And this time she turned her phone off.

"What about calls from the Inn?"

She reached into her purse and pulled out a different phone. "This is a number my mother doesn't have." Trina smiled as Rhett laughed. She'd never been so grateful to have the second device.

"What if I want to send you sexy text messages?"

Panic was a quick cold flash across the nape of her neck before she caught the twinkle in his eye. He was teasing her. She didn't need to overreact. "Somehow I have a hard time seeing you as the sexy text message type."

Rhett scooted lower in his seat, stretching out his legs and folding his hands over his trim abs. The pose drew her attention to his strong legs and the golden body hair that disappeared under the hem of his khaki shorts.

"Definitely not on a dedicated professional line."

She'd been so distracted with his body, it took her a beat to register the words. When she did, she laughed. "I didn't have any idea you were so funny." Did that sound as breathless as it felt coming out of her mouth? She really hoped not.

Clearing her throat, she asked, "Tomorrow? Is there more I need to know?"

"Not really." He sat up straighter. "We can play it by ear. Once we have the license, we can marry at any time."

She managed not to sputter. This was all moving so quickly. "I shouldn't take more than three days," she said. "Not that anyone would question it." Especially when she returned with her husband. "The board is easy to work with. It's just my own professional preference."

Her biggest concern was the likelihood of Luca putting her staff through hell in her absence. They deserved better from her.

"That's plenty of time to hit the high spots around town," Rhett said. "Ilsa works miracles on weddings all the time, whether she has days or weeks to plan." His fingers were tapping again, this time on the seat. "Do you want your own suite or do you want to stay at my place? It's not much different than yours," he added. "But I only have the one bedroom. If you're okay staying with me, I'll take the couch."

Guilt niggled at her yet again. "When this is over, I'm really going to owe you big time." A thought occurred to her. Was he in this for some favor in the future? "Is that what you're counting on?"

"Maybe a little bit." He was joking, his eyes gave him away. "You really don't owe me a thing. I'm happy to help and I figure we might actually have some fun."

"In a pretend marriage." Assuming she could pull it off.

“No one will question our romance or commitment with a wedding planned by Ilsa.”

She’d have to take that on faith.

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“How about this?” He sat forward. “It’s obviously bugging you. Whenever we’re not convincing people we’re happily married, we can brainstorm ways to increase business for your property and mine. More of that co-working, cross-training experience.”

“That’s a fabulous idea.” Suddenly she was much more excited to see both the Ellington Cove and Rhett’s role within the resort as well as his family’s system. She started peppering him with questions about events and management and growth projections.

After a hearty laugh, he was generous with his answers, something she never would have expected after butting heads for so long. It was almost a disappointment when the flight attendant announced they were preparing for arrival.

“I do need to ask one favor up front,” Rhett said as the plane touched down on the runway.

“Anything,” she replied instantly, meaning it. She owed him so much for his help with her parents’ disastrous attempt to marry her off.

“When we get back to Brookwell, please gush as much as possible over Ilsa. Especially to Harper.”

“Oh.” She bit her lip. “I shouldn’t jump in the middle of your sibling rivalry like that.”

“Not even for your husband?”

He really didn't play fair. "Rhett."

"It's not a sibling rivalry," he protested. "It's a business rivalry. I have the best wedding planner on the East Coast and I need her to be jealous."

The emphasis gave him away this time. He was teasing again. Besides, she was confident Ilsa was just as good as he claimed. "Fine. You have my word. I will talk her up until Harper wants to bash me over the head."

Rhett's lightning-quick grin was worth it. "I won't let her hurt you."

She caught herself smiling as they deplaned and he led her toward a waiting car, courtesy of the Cove.

At some point, she needed to analyze why she took him at his word about everything. She didn't trust anyone this easily. Maybe it was because they'd met when she was younger. Or maybe it was seeing the way he doted on his sister. Whatever it was, Rhett had a profoundly positive effect on her. She worried that the way he steadied and soothed her would be a problem someday soon.

Though the relief from her typical anxiety was huge, she couldn't expect it to last. In the meantime, she decided to enjoy whatever magic he was creating in her life right now.

As he drove them toward the Cove, he mentioned some of his favorite places that he wanted her to see. "I know you can't see much of the views in the dark, but I think you'll love the quirky charm."

He would probably be right about that too. "This is my first big tourist moment since I came to the States," she blurted.

“No kidding?”

“I threw myself into the Inn as soon as I arrived,” she explained.

“With excellent results,” he said.

His sincerity was lovely. “Thank you.”

“Wow,” she said as they turned up the long drive to the Ellington Cove. “How do you manage to make people feel welcome before they even get out of the car?”

“That’s a family secret,” he joked. Parking in the designated space, he cut the engine. “Then again, you’re about to become an Ellington so…”

“Stop teasing. You know I don’t expect any insider information as your pretend wife.”

“As my real wife,” he reminded her. “We’re doing this the right way.”

Her heart skipped and twirled in her chest. “You surprise me every other minute.” She wasn’t sure it was a compliment.

“I could say the same thing.” He’d shifted in his seat and enough light filled the car to show her he wasn’t teasing.

Her breath seemed to slow even as her pulse kicked up. “Well, um.” She was a surprise to him? She only meant to be herself. “That’s probably because I’m desperate.”

He plucked his phone out of the cupholder, turning it absently in his hands. “I don’t want you to feel desperate ever again.”



Stunned, she sat there, basking in the warmth of his words and the sincerity in his blue gaze.

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He slipped the phone into his pocket. “Can I hold your hand as we go inside?” he asked.

She didn’t need him to tell her it would help sell their lie. It would be strange to have two people suddenly get married without anyone spotting a single moment of affection. Suddenly she wanted nothing more than to walk hand in hand with Rhett into the famous resort the Ellingtons had lovingly restored a few years ago.

“Yes.” Barely a whisper. “Yes,” she repeated more firmly, adding a smile.

He climbed out of the car, paused to get her suitcase from the trunk, and then opened her door. Standing there, he once again extended his hand, allowing her to complete the connection.

She wondered if he had deliberately made it easier for her by beginning the gesture at the point where she might like his support to get out of the car.

His hold was relaxed. Comforting. And still she felt the spark of his touch all the way to her toes as they walked into the building.

The doors parted on a whisper and they were suddenly surrounded by the grandeur of the lobby.

Even with the lights set lower for the late hour, the space was gorgeous. A soothing tropical ease was her first impression. Ceiling fans shaped like wide palm leaves stirred the air and lush, live greenery softened the necessary angles, breaking up the gathering areas and loosely framing a path to the front desk.

“Welcome back, Mr. Ellington!” A young man at the front desk beamed at them.

“Thanks, Dean. It’s good to be home,” Rhett replied. “Dean, this is Trina Bollani, my fiancée.”

To his credit, Dean didn’t blink or miss a beat. “Congratulations to you both. Welcome to the Cove, Ms. Bollani.”

“Please, call me Trina. It’s a pleasure to meet you.” She gave Dean bonus points for his calm reaction. In the back of her mind, she wondered if Jacob would be as smooth when she broke the news to her staff.

“I’ll make the full announcement tomorrow at the staff meeting,” Rhett explained.

Dean straightened and his expression turned quite serious. “I’ll hold it as an honored secret until then, sir.”

Rhett chuckled. “Thanks, man.”

“Let us know if you need anything,” he called softly as they walked on.

Rhett guided her down the hall toward the main elevators. They rode up a couple of floors and then got off. He turned down another hallway and tapped a card to a security panel near a discreet service door.

“Will I be able to get in and out without you?” She’d made a mental note of the route, though that wouldn’t help if the card failed her.

“I’ll have a card ready for you in the morning. It’s a few extra steps and I didn’t want to bother Dean with it tonight. He’s never done one before.” Rhett smiled. “There’s never been a need until now.”

At the end of a service hallway that was pleasant, but not decorated like the front-facing areas, he tapped his card one more time to unlock what appeared to be a normal hotel room door. He pushed open the door and she followed him inside. His scent surrounded her, drawing her deeper into his residence.

When the door closed he threw the deadbolt. “Just one lock. But there’s no threat of anyone stumbling upon our door.”

She appreciated his assurance, even though it embarrassed her to need it so much. “How long have you lived here?”

“Two years now.” He wheeled her suitcase through the living area and past the kitchen, toward what must be the bedroom door. “Please, make yourself at home. I’ll grab a couple of things and hit the couch. We’ve got a big day tomorrow.”

She froze in the doorway, staring at the gorgeous, four-poster, king size bed. A familiar, unwelcome rush of nerves chilled her skin. As much as she wanted to be one of those confident women who could suggest they share the bed platonically, she wasn’t ready for that. “Thank you.”

“Do you need anything? I’ve got an inside line on high-end toiletries.”

This man. She chuckled. “No, I’ll be fine.”

She stood there feeling awkward as he gathered the things he needed. Lastly, he took a pillow from one side of the bed and wished her a good night.

“Good night,” she said, a beat too late. He’d already closed the door.

After checking to make sure there were no messages from Jacob, she quickly got ready for bed. Sliding under the covers, it was obvious he’d asked the room to be

serviced. The linens were clean, the bed freshly made. And yet the room itself still carried an unmistakable hint of Rhett's masculine scent.

It was simultaneously wonderful and terrifying. He was the last person she would expect to come to her aid, but she couldn't have asked for a more thoughtful friend.

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Standing up to Luca, arranging for an impromptu wedding, insisting on an official marriage. The man was handling each detail with such decisiveness and compassion. She should probably have more to say about all of it, but she was too relieved.

Now that she'd had some time to consider, he was right about her parents. When they heard about the marriage, they would insist on seeing that everything was legal and in order or they would never be convinced.

Divorce might be an eventual scandal but that was future Trina's problem. Anything was better than being married to Luca.

Closing her eyes, she coached herself to sleep. Tomorrow was certain to be another whirlwind of epic emotional proportions.

### Chapter Eight

Rhett did a double take when Trina emerged from his bedroom the next morning. He'd had a rough night on the couch, knowing she was in his bed. So close and absolutely too far away.

He wanted to find an excuse to duck into his room and bury his face in her pillow.

The right move was to ignore that notion and any similar ideas. This wasn't the right time to reveal his attraction and infatuation.

She didn't make it easy. A little bleary-eyed, she still looked amazing in another curve hugging dress, this one in a red and pink print with a full skirt that stopped at

her knees. Narrow sheer panels added tantalizing detail around the neckline. Her makeup was flawless and she'd gathered her hair up in a casual twist, a few curls loosely framing her face. Her feet were bare, strappy sandals dangling from one finger.

Thoughts and feelings had him jumbled up. He wanted to swoop in and kiss her rosy lips. Somehow, he managed to say good morning.

"Good morning." She abruptly turned away, covering a yawn with her free hand.

"You didn't sleep well?" He blamed himself for pushing too hard. "Should we take the day to rest?" They had some wiggle room in the schedule.

She waved off his concern. "I slept fine, thank you. Is there coffee?"

"Of course." Bleary-eyed was better than scared, and a problem solved easily with caffeine. And though he was sure she still had doubts, she kept choosing this path with him over the marriage her parents were pushing. Silently, he vowed to make this as easy and romantic for her as possible.

"Would you prefer espresso?"

Everything about her seemed to lift with hope. Making her more beautiful still.

"You have espresso?"

He pointed to the machine just over his shoulder. "At your service."

"Oh, yes please."

"Coming right up." He patted one of the counter stools. "Have a seat."

While the machine did its thing he pulled two breakfast trays out of the warming oven and set them on the island in front of her.

Anticipation filled her big brown eyes. “That smells divine.”

“It should. It’s room service.” He winked.

She sighed. “Isn’t that one of the best things about hotel life?” she asked. “I do love to cook, but I enjoy it so much more when I have the time to do it right.”

“More lessons from your nonna?”

Her sudden smile struck him like a sunbeam. “I’m that obvious?”

“A lucky guess.” He served her the espresso and poured plain black coffee for himself. They both caffeinated in a companionable silence for a few minutes.

“You want to share the agenda running through your head?” she asked. “I think I can follow along now.”

He didn’t bother denying it. Though he wondered how she read him so well. Cradling his coffee cup in both hands, he said, “If we take care of the marriage license first thing today, we have plenty of options to fit in sightseeing and wedding planning.”

“Makes sense,” she agreed.



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“I didn’t make an appointment, so we’ll probably have to wait a bit.”

“Will that mess up Ilsa’s schedule?”

He pulled out his phone and pulled up the message from the wedding coordinator. Trina leaned forward, read the message, and sat back with a short giggle. “She’s cleared the whole day? Lucky us.”

“Lucky us,” he echoed. The previous email, one he hadn’t shared with Trina, had been a discussion about wedding rings—stones, settings, and styles—and venue options he thought she’d enjoy.

She lifted the cover from the plate closest to her. “Maple sausage?” she queried.

“Among other things.” He’d requested French toast and a veggie omelet to give her plenty of choices. “Dig in. The office opens at nine.”

“I’m famished,” she said, picking up her fork. “Thanks.”

They talked more about room service menus and memorable chefs they’d worked with through their careers. He got the impression she was deliberately avoiding wedding talk. He didn’t mind. They’d be talking it over plenty in another couple of hours.

When they finished breakfast he pocketed his wallet, phone, and passport while she slipped on her sandals and grabbed her purse. The shoes gave her a subtle height boost and he had to drag his attention away from her mouth. Was there any way to make

sure he could kiss her on their wedding day? It was usually part of the ceremony, but he'd cope with it if she opted out.

Obviously.

He wasn't a pushy bastard, just a regular man who was increasingly attracted to a woman who didn't seem to share the same level of interest.

What did he expect? It wasn't as if they shared the same close friendship as their fathers. The opposite, actually. Up until a few months ago, he could barely think of her without annoyance or outright animosity, harboring sour feelings over the way she outshined him back in college.

He'd done a helluva one-eighty since finding her upset and scared on the beach last night. That wasn't entirely accurate. He hadn't looked at her as the enemy before France, only after she'd defeated him time and again during their program. Now, over a decade later, he silently vowed to earn her trust and confidence in him and his commitment to this wacky plan. His commitment to protecting her.

"I'm looking forward to meeting Ilsa," she said as they walked toward the clerk's office.

He casually offered his hand, feeling victorious when she seized it. "You two will adore each other," he promised.

To their mutual surprise, they didn't have to wait more than a few minutes before their paperwork was reviewed and they were issued a marriage license.

"That seems way too easy," she observed under her breath as they walked back to the car.

“Take the win,” he urged. “Gives you and Ilsa more time to bond.”

She smiled at him, her eyes hidden behind her sunglasses as he opened the car door for her. “You really think the world of her.”

He nodded. “She’s amazing. You’ll see.”

She didn’t immediately move into the passenger seat. Instead, she lingered, way too close for his comfort. He was too aware of her, of how the sunshine sparked off her glossy hair and warmed her skin, lifting her scent to wind around him.

“Trina?”

Her fingers lightly covered his where he clung to the top of the open door. “I need to say it one more time.” Her full lips pressed together for a moment. “Having an option is a relief in and of itself. But going through with it? I’m worried this will screw up our lives. Mine’s a mess, but yours?—”

“Let me stop you right there.” He had to pause before he leaned in and stole a kiss she wasn’t offering. “I will disagree with you one more time. Or as many times as it takes. I’m in.”

“But, Rhett.”

He shook his head. “You were afraid last night.”

“Yes,” she whispered.

“Then this is where I need to be. Where I want to be.”

She gave a small, jerky nod. “Okay.” And finally showed some mercy and slipped

into the car.

He closed the door, deliberately ignoring the glimpse of her legs as the skirt drifted higher.

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Once he was behind the steering wheel, the engine humming, he sent Ilsa a text that they were headed her way.

“Does she know this is fake?” Trina asked.

“Only if we tell her it is,” he replied. “She might suspect, since this is the first anyone has heard of me in a relationship.” He glanced over and caught her nibbling on her lip. “Don’t worry. We’re doing everything the right way. Everyone will buy in. You’ll see.”

“Mm-hm.” Her skepticism was clear enough. “I’m sure you’re right.” She shook out her hands. “Don’t you worry...” Her voice trailed off.

Her head tipped to the side and he knew what she was thinking. “That everyone will think it’s weird that it’s me.” He said what they were both thinking.

“Yes, exactly. And it’s terribly insulting to you, even as a thought inside my head.”

“Stranger things have happened than you and I having a secret romance.” At her snort, he plowed on. “I’ll do my best to make it easy for you to play the role of my wife in public. It’s not like we’ll be out and about together all the time.”

“Clearly you’ve forgotten how Brookwell works,” she said. “I will try, I promise.”

He hadn’t forgotten the quirks of the small town or the active gossip grapevine. “You have to be yourself, Trina. That’s all.” He couldn’t shake the image of her frightened and teary on the beach. He didn’t need the whole story on Luca until she was ready to

share, but backing out of this plan was a bad idea. “No one’s ever seen you in a relationship, right?”

“That’s true,” she said, thoughtfully.

Driving a courtesy car, he drove up to the front entrance to make life easier for the valet team. “So we’ll be together, a team. It wouldn’t make sense for either of us to be super affectionate in public anyway.”

“Another good point. I can’t imagine creating any kind of scene in public. Other than when we triumph in trivia.”

He chuckled. With the car parked, the engine off, he turned to her. “Feel better?”

“Much, yes.” She gave him a smile that took him out at the knees.

He had to wait a beat before he climbed out of the car, just to make sure he didn’t trip over his feet. The Trina-effect was potent stuff, at least for him. She always leveled him in the most unexpected moments.

Her beauty had stunned him when he recognized her at the orientation for their internship in France. He hadn’t seen her or thought of her in years. Not since a visit to Italy when they’d all been kids.

But physical beauty was only scraping the surface. She was smart and creative, with an iron will when it came to any kind of challenge. He’d seen glimpses of those traits whenever he visited Brookwell with his sister. Trina went out of her way to be kind to everyone—even him. As she’d said, they were both making an effort to keep the peace for Harper. Each interaction with Trina made it easier to view her through the lens of a mature adult rather than the annoyed student he’d been.

He liked the changes he'd allowed himself to see.

Walking around the car, he met her where she waited at the closed passenger door, her purse tucked under one arm. "Everything okay?"

"Yes." She stepped right up to him and with her teeth worrying her full lower lip, she reached out and took his hand. "Is this okay?"

She might as well have punched him in the heart. "Perfect," he managed. He was in over his head and realized he couldn't deny her much of anything. An issue he would have to work on.

Carefully, she wove her fingers through his and he focused on the soft heat, the contrast of her wine-colored fingernails marching along the back of his hand. Still nibbling on her lip, she lifted her gaze to his.

They could stand there at the hotel entrance for a hundred years. He was not about to break whatever spell had come over her. Her smile turned shy, and he felt a subtle tremor through their joined hands. "I will do my best in public to show you the affection of a wife in love."

"To sell our story," he croaked.

She swallowed. "Exactly. I'm warning you. I'm not very good at it."

"You're doing great." His body practically vibrated with the need to bring her closer, to tip up her chin and kiss her lightly on those luscious lips.

Tapping into some previously unknown well of willpower, he guided her into the lobby and back toward the admin wing.

He was about to marry a warm and vibrant woman who'd been hiding for too long. Trina deserved every good thing he could offer. He wanted her whole story. Wanted to destroy Gallo for whatever he'd done to scare her so badly. Hell, he'd slay any and all of her dragons until justice and peace filled her heart rather than fear and uncertainty.

He bent his head closer to her ear. "Do you trust me?"

"Yes," she confessed on a whisper.



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“Good. Just remember, whatever you’re comfortable with, I’ll make sure it works.”

A smile teased the corner of her lips. “For the story.”

He could only nod his head. With her so close, the scent of her winding around him, he was afraid of saying the wrong thing. He needed a plan to cope with the way she stirred him up. But right now he had a job to do and a schedule to keep.

He smiled into her deep brown eyes and gave her hand the softest of squeezes. “Let’s get this wedding planned.”

### Chapter Nine

Holding Rhett’s hand was a big step. Amazingly, it brought Trina great comfort. She never would’ve expected the patience and compassion he’d shown her. And if she occasionally imagined a flare of heat in his gaze, no one could blame her for a fleeting fantasy.

Because it was all fantasy.

She was about to walk in and plan a real wedding for a pretend romance. And she was remarkably okay with it. Anything to escape the relentless push toward Luca. She tugged her thoughts away from that dangerous precipice.

An eager bride shouldn’t meet the best consultant in the business with a shadow of grief lurking in her eyes.

“We’re doing great, right?” she queried as they strolled down the hallway. Her goal was finding the sweet spot between clingy and aloof.

“We’re the picture of happiness.”

His assurance meant more than he would probably ever realize. If he’d needed to smooth anything over, he had done it so flawlessly she hadn’t noticed.

“You’re the best ally,” she murmured. “I appreciate it.”

“After this meeting, word will spread pretty quickly about our wedding,” Rhett warned. He’d paused just outside Ilsa’s office.

Startled, she shot him a questioning look.

“Oh no,” he understood her concern immediately. “Ilsa isn’t a gossip. I prepped an all-staff email to send as soon as the details are decided. I just want you to be ready.”

“I will be.” She would not let his extraordinary effort be in vain. Nervous as she was, she was committed to this path as the best way out of an unbearable union.

Near the door, Trina heard a woman speaking. “I need you to take a breath and sit down.”

Trina glanced again at Rhett, caught him smiling.

“That’s it,” the woman continued. “I’m counting on you to be a good girl.”

Rhett leaned close and Trina felt a little shiver. Not fear, anticipation. She was becoming way too infatuated with her fake groom.

“Are you afraid of dogs?” he whispered.

She shook her head. Someday she hoped to have a dog of her own. “The wedding planner has a dog?”

“The best dog,” he said with such an endearing smile, her heart fluttered.

Excited about meeting Ilsa’s dog, Trina edged closer to the doorway. Rhett rapped his knuckles on the open door and a pitiful whiny wail was the response.

Trina couldn’t see the dog yet, just the wedding planner’s eye roll. “Yes, Annie. Your buddy is here,” Ilsa said. “Please, come in.”

Rhett released Trina, going straight for the dog who was wiggling like mad behind the desk. He dropped to a knee and an immediate mutual love fest commenced as the two friends greeted each other.

The woman stood, reaching across the desk to shake Trina’s hand. “Welcome. Trina, right?”

“Yes.”

“I’m Ilsa. It’s a pleasure to meet you.” The wedding planner was about the same height as Trina and just as curvy. With blue eyes and straight brown hair swept back into a sleek tail, she put Trina in mind of the typical American girl next door—just a bit more mature.

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“And you.” Trina grinned. “Your dog is adorable.”

“If she’s a problem, I can corral her. She adores Rhett.”

“Seems mutual,” Trina observed, completely enchanted by the burly white dog with tan spots. Her ears were laid back as she leaned into Rhett’s attention. Trina struggled to contain her laughter as Rhett carried on. She’d never seen him quite so silly.

“You two go ahead and plan,” Rhett said from the floor. “Whatever Trina wants is fine with me. I’ll keep Annie busy.”

“Annie is it? She’s such a beauty.”

Ilsa beamed. “Thank you. She’s my partner in everything. She doesn’t come in every day, but she’s been missing Rhett. He was confident you wouldn’t mind.”

Rhett rolled to his feet and stuck his hand in a jar up on a shelf. He pulled out a treat and gave it to Annie. Clearly the two had a system. “Once we decide on rings, I’ll let the two of you hash out the rest of the details. Maybe Annie and I can go for a walk?”

The hope was obvious in his voice and on his face. He looked like a little kid.

“You really should get your own.”

The deep voice right behind her gave Trina a start. She hadn’t realized anyone else had joined them. She caught the concern on Rhett’s face and schooled her own features into something cheerful.

“Hello,” she said.

Rhett popped to his feet. “Trina, this is Max, Ilsa’s husband.” He came to stand beside her, without crowding her personal space.

“Not the same Max who owns the gym you enjoy?” she asked with her best welcoming smile. He stood almost as tall as Rhett, his brown hair brushed back, revealing a dashing gray at the temples. His green eyes were sharp and she could feel him cataloguing every detail.

“The very same,” Max confirmed, extending his hand. “Pleased to meet you, Trina. And congratulations to you both.”

There was a hint of a question in there, but Rhett glossed right over it. “Thanks! We’re super happy.”

“I can see that,” Max said. “Why don’t we take Annie with us,” Max suggested. “Rhett and I can catch up and give you space to debate lilies and roses.”

Ilsa laughed. “That works. Rhett would like to decide on the rings first.”

“Want me to step out?” Max asked Trina.

“Not at all.” She was curious about the velvet boxes lined up on the desk. She had a fondness for jewelry. “I shouldn’t be surprised that you’ve pulled all of this together so quickly,” she said, smiling at Rhett. Not only was she impressed, she was genuinely happy with the minor miracles he kept delivering.

“Let’s look over here in the sunlight.” Ilsa carried the boxes over to a round bistro-style table situated in front of a wide window. “Have a seat.”

She swept aside the sheers, letting the bright Florida sunshine pour through the glass. Sitting across from Trina, she opened the boxes one by one.

Trina gasped as the gems inside sparkled and gleamed in the light. “Oh, my,” she breathed, more than a little awestruck. Her hand pressed to her racing heart. More words were impossible as she admired the selection of classic diamond solitaires, two emeralds, a gorgeous ruby, and a round opal nestled in a setting of diamonds.

“So many choices,” she managed after a long moment. How had he pulled this together with zero notice? His connections around town were remarkable.

“If none of these suit you,” Rhett began.

“Oh no!” She bounced a little in her seat. “I already have a favorite.” Smiling at Ilsa she added, “How on earth did you know what to show me?”

“Can I guess which one?” Rhett asked before Ilsa could respond. He was practically humming with all the excited anticipation of a kid at Christmas.

He pressed a little closer, his arm draping loosely around her shoulders. She wasn’t sure how she managed not to stiffen up within his embrace. He was so good about putting her at ease and projecting the happy-couple image they needed people to see.

To her shock, he plucked the opal out of the box, and offered it to her.

Every step they took in this charade felt more and more real. Made her want it to be real.

“It’s this one. Right?”

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She stared at him, marveling at his ability to play the role of doting fiancé. How had he figured her out? “Yes.” Her voice cracked on the lone syllable. She cleared her throat, summoning a smile. “I’ve always been partial to opals.” But she didn’t wear them often. The pendant and earrings she had were handed down from Nonna and she was exceedingly cautious with them.

“Your grandmother’s influence?”

“Yes,” she repeated. She was warm and tingly all over. Good thing she was sitting down because she wouldn’t have so far to fall if she fainted.

Rhett was grinning at Ilsa. “I knew it.”

“You did,” she praised.

How? It wouldn’t be right to ask him here. Was it a simple case of keeping your enemies close? Still, it was hard to imagine Rhett Ellington studying her so closely in any context.

Holding the ring, he reached for her hand. She didn’t flinch or pull away. Didn’t even feel the urge.

“Trina Bollani, will you be my wife?”

The ring hovered right there at the tip of her finger as he waited for her response. At last, she managed a quick nod, a murmured “yes”. Overcome, her eyes misted as the gold band slipped down the length of her finger. A perfect fit. One more detail he had

mysteriously gotten correct.

She felt a tear spill over her lashes and blotted it away before a flood followed. Tonight, alone in bed, she could privately grieve that this would likely be the only proposal in her life. And just as he promised, he made it memorable. Before she realized what she'd done, she stood and threw her arms around him as gratitude and something indefinable welled up inside her.

Remembering where they were, she pulled back and wiggled her finger, letting the opal and the halo of diamonds wink and shine. "It's perfect. Thank you."

Catching his gaze, she knew he understood the full depth of those brief words.

Because he was right. About all of it. They would need to carry on this charade long enough to convince her parents to stop interfering with her life. Whether that was a few months or a full year, she needed Rhett's support and protection.

Then it would be a quiet divorce.

After that, she was on her own. Looking ahead, she worried she might never forget him or be willing to move on with someone else. But that was a problem for future-Trina.

At the other side of the table, Ilsa sniffled. "Youtwo. My goodness." She fanned her face. "I admit, I was startled to see Rhett's email, but now I understand." Tapping her fingertips together, she said, "Shall we plan the perfect instant wedding for you?"

Rhett brushed a kiss to Trina's cheek. "Please do." His gaze locked with hers. "Whatever suits you will be exactly what I want." Shifting his attention to Ilsa, he said, "I'll let Max save me from the particulars."



“What a groom-move,” Ilsa joked. “Go on.”

“Are you sure?” Trina wasn’t as confident about knowing what Rhett wanted. It seemed like a minor miracle that he’d known the opal was her first choice, and yet he’d done it so naturally. Could she say the same about the decisions ahead of her? What would Ilsa think if she made a blatantly wrong choice for their special day?

Their fake special day.

“I trust you to know what I want,” he assured her. There was a heat and an intensity in his eyes that she wished was real. Maybe he was just reminding her to sell the story. To be the happy couple.

How much did it really matter to him anyway? “All right,” she said, playing along. “Have fun.”

After a kiss for his wife, Max, Rhett, and Annie bustled out of the office, leaving Trina and Ilsa to sort out wedding details.

Ilsa closed the door behind them and turned back to Trina, her smile wide and eyes gleaming. “Privacy at last. I’m desperate to hear how all this came to be, but you don’t have to tell me anything. I’ve just never seen him look at anyone the way he looks at you.”

She owed Rhett big time for being able to fool his friends so effectively. “It was a shock to both of us,” she said. “Neither of us were looking for romance and definitely not marriage. Then when we realized, we didn’t want to waste anytime.”

“Smart,” Ilsa nodded sagely. “When you know, you know.”

Ilsa picked up a binder and returned to the table at the window. “Would you like

coffee or tea?”

Trina pressed a hand to her midriff. “Tea would be lovely.” She watched Ilsa set everything in motion at the small station behind her desk. “I appreciate everything you’re doing to make our wedding wonderful.”

“We haven’t even started the fun,” Ilsa replied. “And already it’s a pleasure. Not only because he’s the boss.” She grinned. “Weddings are my happy place. Rhett tells me you only have a few days before you have to be back in South Carolina. In the email he mentioned you run a hotel yourself.”

She nodded. “That’s right. Though, as manager, not an owner. I did grow up in the hotel industry though. My parents own a handful of properties in Italy along with a hotel management company. Rhett’s father and mine are close.”

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“They must be so excited for you.”

Trina hummed a small agreement and sipped her tea, wishing she didn’t have to lie to a woman she would be happy to call a personal friend.

“Will they be joining you for the ceremony?”

“No.” Trina ignored the heat flooding her face. “I love my parents dearly and I’m proud of my Italian roots. That said, Rhett and I decided that eloping is the best wedding present we could give each other.”

Ilsa’s laughter was contagious. “That’s fine by me. Simplifies a few things, too. Do you want to start with the venue or flowers?”

After that, the questions came in a flurry. Trina found herself making decisions by following her intuition and her own preferences. Piece by piece, the wedding plans came together. They would be married out on the water during a sunset cruise. When Trina couldn’t hide her discomfort over being one of several couples on a wedding cruise, Ilsa made a few phone calls and scheduled the private event.

“You’ll need witnesses,” she explained. “Max and I are available, unless there’s someone else you would like to invite.”

Trina thought of Rhett’s face when he spoke of Max, the gym, “his” wedding planner, and her dog. “We would be honored to have you and Max stand up for us. Can Annie come along?”

“Annie isn’t big on watercraft,” Ilsa replied, smiling. “But if you want to have a reception, either here or just a small nightcap at our place, she would be happy to attend.”

A nightcap sounded lovely. “Rhett would get a kick out of that. Maybe champagne and some light appetizers with the two of you, as long as we can order something. I don’t want you going to any further trouble.” Having a quiet plan in place for after the ceremony might keep her from freaking out that she’d married a man she barely knew to avoid a marriage that would crush her.

“No trouble at all. I’ll contact catering and have them handle everything.” She moved to her desk, but paused with her hand on the Cove house phone.

“Trina, I realize you don’t know any of us, but we all adore Rhett. Would you be willing to host a small reception here at the Cove after the ceremony?” she asked. “We’ll keep it super informal, and I won’t let it drag on, but it would give everyone here a chance to celebrate this occasion with you.”

She hadn’t anticipated being a bride in front of a crowd. “Oh.” What would Rhett want her to do? “We were hoping to keep this as quiet as possible,” she said as she searched for the right answer. Then she thought of her own staff and knew they would want to help her celebrate as soon as they heard the news.

“Rhett warned me that he sent an email to the staff.”

“He did.” Ilsa bobbed her head. “My email has been blowing up for the last 30 minutes with people asking all the questions.”

“Well that decides it. Of course we’ll do a reception. Especially if it won’t create more chaos for the team.” She hoped Rhett would be okay with an impromptu wedding reception.

“They’ll be honored to jump in,” Ilsa assured her. “Leave the details to me. Do you have a favorite champagne?”

“Not really.” They probably wouldn’t have her preferred French brand in stock. And it was ridiculously expensive. “I am partial to prosecco, if it’s available.”

“Of course.” Ilsa was all smiles once more. “Should’ve thought of that.” She made a few more notes as they discussed favorite cake flavors and food options to serve at the reception.

“You can trust the kitchen to come through. And, bonus, if there’s something that sounds particularly yummy to either you or Rhett during the party, I’ll have the kitchen work it up for you.”

“Wow, thanks.”

“It’s my job.” She reviewed her growing list. “We’ve covered flowers for you and Rhett as the only two members of the wedding party. If you don’t mind, I’ll build from that for the reception.”

Trina nodded in agreement. It was all spinning so fast through her head. The time for backing out seemed to have passed. Well, it had passed when Rhett sent the email to his staff. She wondered now if he’d done that deliberately.

“I must say, you’ve got a great eye for floral design.”

“Thanks.” The compliment made Trina happy. “One of my friends on Brookwell is a florist. I’ve learned quite a bit from her.”

“Tell her it shows,” Ilsa approved. “Okay. The only thing left is attire. Do you have a dress?”

Trina shook her head. “No. Nothing suitable for what we’ve planned. This is a lot more involved than I anticipated for an elopement,” she admitted. “I’m woefully ill-prepared.”

“Because Rhett knew you’d have me. He was clear that this should be a special occasion, despite the lack of guests.”

“Memorable, yes,” Trina agreed. What would she be wearing in the photos? It was one thing when she only had to consider a sunset cruise. Casual worked well for that, at least in her mind. But a reception with his staff? She needed something decidedly... More.

“I’ll need to shop for something today. What do you think he’ll expect?”

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“You’re welcome to be as fancy or casual as you like as the bride and groom,” Ilsa began. “Of course, we’re not likely to get alterations accomplished by tomorrow afternoon when we board the boat. And the reception is last-minute.” She tapped her fingers on her notebook. “How about this? If you don’t mind me inserting myself even further into your special day, why don’t we go shopping and grab a bite of lunch? I’m sure we can find exactly what you both need for tomorrow night.”

It was an offer Trina didn’t dare turn down. Relief brought a smile to her face, lightened the growing pressure across her shoulders. “I’d love that, thank you.”

“Awesome, I’ll let the guys know you’re with me.”

“Wonderful.” She should’ve thought to reach out to Rhett. Trina needed to make more of an effort to behave like an invested bride. She had examples of happy couples to emulate. Back home, on Brookwell, many of her new friends had husbands or significant others and they all checked in often with one another. She and Rhett were a team now.

For better or worse.

When she thought of it like that, the two of them against a skeptical world, she got more enthused about playing her part. It was easier to think of this situation as another competition. Rhett might already be doing the same thing.

Well, she had all the motivation to win—with him as a partner rather than an opponent this time—because one thing remained the same: losing would be disastrous.

From her purse, her work phone chimed. “Work,” she explained. “Pardon me. I’ll only be a minute.”

“Take your time.” Ilsa waved off the interruption.

She knew no one on her staff would bother her unless it was something serious.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Ms. Bollani, I’ve got a VIP situation.” Maria, the day manager, sounded as if she was gritting her teeth. “The guest who arrived early last night?—”

“Mr. Gallo,” Trina clarified, cringing on the inside.

“Yes, ma’am.” Maria paused. “He isn’t satisfied with the room, claims the gift basket is a disappointment, and he is determined that you are somewhere on the property.”

What an ass. Trina’s teeth locked as she held in that and more unpleasant responses.

“I’ve offered a tour package and dinner reservations, but he insists on speaking with you.”

“My apologies, Maria. You’re doing exactly what needs to be done.” Maybe if she was lucky, Luca would go stay at another hotel until she returned—married and out of his reach.

“I’ll call him and see how I can help. Please text me his number.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Her relief was palpable, even through the phone.

Trina deliberately smiled to veil her rising tension. This was her job, to back up her



people. If Luca couldn't be civil, it would be an excellent excuse to give him the boot. "You're amazing, Maria. Don't forget it."

"I've told him you were called away on business," she said, her voice barely a whisper. "He refuses to believe me. He's telling anyone who will listen that you've been expecting him and promised to make time to show him the sights."

Which meant he was telling everyone on the staff since she'd trained them to be friendly and approachable. She closed her eyes, searched for a thread of patience. "He's a family friend, though right now it shames me to admit it." And he'd never be a friend of hers again. "I'll think of something," she assured Maria. She refused to ask any of her friends to help welcome a man she didn't want to see at all. "I'll call him now and hopefully he won't trouble you any further."

"Thank you, Ms. Bollani."

"Thank you," she said. "And have a better day."

With Maria's soft chuckle lingering in her ear, Trina stared out the window. The sunshine and flowers were an afterthought as she struggled to find a workable solution for the trouble Luca was causing.

Swearing under her breath, she tapped the cell phone against her palm. What could she tell him? Not the truth. It was too soon for that. He wasn't her friend, so he wasn't entitled to any details about her life. Not only that, she wasn't ready for him to tattle about her sudden wedding plans to her parents. Whatever picture her mother and father had painted for Luca, she was not going to give into their pressure.

How brave she was now that Rhett had lent his support.

"Everything okay?" Ilsa asked.

“Yes, of course.” Trina smiled. “Rhett raves about the staff here, but I have a great team too. Just let me send a text and we can go.” Calling would only open herself up to stress and misery and an inevitable argument.

“Take your time.”

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She fired off a message reminding Luca he was a guest—one who had arrived well-ahead of schedule. She added a politely vague comment about catching up when she returned from her business trip.

He responded immediately, predictably arrogant and cloying. She ignored his clumsy compliments, explained she was on her way to another meeting, and dropped the phone into her purse. “I’m ready.”

Her phone was ringing before they reached Ilsa’s car. She checked, groaning when the caller ID showed Luca’s name. She’d just told him she couldn’t talk, the jerk.

She declined the call and silenced the phone. If he continued to pester her staff, they would manage him. Somehow. Probably. She had full confidence in them and that would suffice for now.

In the passenger seat, she buckled up. “I’m really ready,” she declared with a determined smile. “No more distractions.”

“Wonderful.” Ilsa started the car. “Let’s go have some fun.”

Trina was all-in for shopping and fun with a new friend.

### Chapter Ten

Confident Ilsa was working her magic with Trina, Rhett relaxed just a little. She wouldn’t back out now that he’d put the ring on her finger. He’d had his doubts right up to that point, but the look in her eyes—a blend of gratitude and excitement—gave

him hope.

Despite what he'd said before the meeting, it wasn't all for show. Though he suspected telling her would send her reeling—not the result he was after. He couldn't pinpoint the moment when his commitment surpassed her predicament, but now that it had, he wanted this marriage to succeed. To protect her, sure. But he was inexplicably convinced they could have a good relationship and a wonderful life. In time.

For the moment, he focused on having fun with Annie as they walked with Max.

The dog's big chest and stocky build was intimidating to anyone who didn't know her, which was a big reason Ilsa had adopted her. At the Cove, Ilsa felt safe, allowing Annie to become more comfortable as well. It hadn't taken long for everyone at the Cove to fall in love with Annie. At this point, he should probably be paying Annie for keeping morale high among the staff.

Now, Ilsa had Max as well for both love and security. The three of them were generally inseparable, but it was odd for Max to be at his wife's office first thing in the morning.

With the sun lighting up the winding path through one of the lush garden courtyards between the admin wing and the hotel proper, Rhett and Max chatted.

Glancing around to confirm they were alone, Rhett kept his voice low. "So I take it you came to see for yourself." He didn't want anyone to overhear and suspect their whirlwind wedding wasn't the real deal.

"You knew Ilsa wouldn't keep an email like that to herself."

Rhett didn't contradict him. "Are you about to turn this into a teaching moment about

clear communication in a marriage?”

Max shrugged a burly shoulder. “It makes a difference.”

They paused for Annie to thoroughly sniff a cluster of bright yellow hibiscus blooms. She smiled up at Max and then gave a mighty sneeze. Both men laughed.

“If you need to talk, I’m a good listener,” Max continued.

“It’s all good,” he assured his friend and occasional mentor. “We know how it looks.” He tipped back his head and muttered an oath at the clear blue sky. “Trust me, it’s the right decision.”

“She’s pregnant?”

Rhett was momentarily taken aback. He should’ve anticipated that assumption. “No.” He’d figured they’d have to stay married at least a year to appease her parents. “Almost as bad, her parents are trying to marry her off to a man of their choosing. It’s strange,” he mused. “They’re good people, but in this instance, they don’t seem to care that she’s not into the idea. Until me, she was determined not to marry at all.”

And her reasons—the reasons he suspected, at any rate—concerned him greatly.

Max whistled. “Not cool.” He crouched to scratch Annie’s ears. “Makes me glad I never had kids of my own to mess up. I like being the fun uncle.”

Rhett hadn’t bothered to do the math, it was enough to know Max and Ilsa were older than him and younger than his parents. They’d met later in life and were so obviously delighted with each other. When he’d seen the text that the older couple would serve as witnesses tomorrow evening, it felt right. “I’m glad you’ll be with us tomorrow.”

“Our pleasure.” Max clapped him on the shoulder. “You saw the text about the reception following?”

Rhett laughed. “It’s almost scary what your wife can pull off with zero notice.”

“You can say that again,” Max agreed. “Why don’t you tell me what’s really going on?”

“I’m not entirely sure,” Rhett blurted. “Trina hasn’t explained any real details, but something is wrong. Specifically with the latest man her parents sent over to woo her. She slipped away from her friends without a word last night.” He shoved a hand through his hair. “That’s not like her at all. I found her on the beach, miserable and fighting tears after hearing the next guy was due any day. From what I heard, the first two men she dealt with and sent back to Italy without much fuss or fanfare.”

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“You have a name? We could do some digging.”

“Luca Gallo. The man was actually at the Inn when I drove her back. Three days early.”

“Eager.”

Rhett hadn't looked at it that way. “Yes. And pushy.” He shoved his hands into his pockets. “The guy knocked on her door and all but declared them married.”

“Pissed you off,” Max observed.

“Yes. I was holding steady at concerned and annoyed up to that point.”

“Her parents don't have a clue that this is the wrong play?”

Rhett shook his head. “Trina's tried to hold them off, but they want her married.”

“So you're taking on the role of husband.”

It wasn't a question, but Rhett answered it as if it was. “Seemed like the best idea at the time.”

“You're playing the part well.”

He snorted. “And I'll keep it up. Gallo will be waiting for her when we get back to Brookwell.”

“Jess can’t run him off?”

“Maternity leave.”

“Right.” Max winced. “Ilsa sent her a care package once we got the news. Have you seen her? Is she happy?”

Rhett grinned. “Jess is living her best life.” He wasn’t particularly close to the former Key West police officer who now worked with the Guardian Agency, but his brief interactions had been positive.

“She sounds so relaxed when we talk. Nice to have it confirmed by someone right there.”

“You know it is possible for you to come up and see her yourself,” Rhett said. “She’d probably enjoy a visit. And you can be an honorary fun uncle.”

Max rolled his shoulders. “Maybe we will.” He patted Annie on the head. “We’ll have to be super careful.” He aimed a sly look at Rhett. “My wife is pretty busy, and her boss thinks every time she leaves she’s checking out new places to work. The stress is unbearable.”

Rhett cracked up. “I’m not that bad. I only told her she couldn’t take calls from my sister. Officially, Trina is here to shadow her for a couple of days while she works up a new wedding menu for the Inn.”

“Huh. I was sure you also told my wife you wanted the option to counter any offers she might get from any other source.” Max rocked back on his heels.

“That’s just a sign of my excellent management. Your wife has serious skills. We both know she’s the reason so many people come here for weddings.” Including him.



Rhett changed the subject. “Got space for me in the gym this afternoon?”

“It’s a big place,” Max said. “You want Trina to come watch you? I can put a bug in Ilsa’s ear.”

Rhett bent down to love on Annie some more. “I’ll invite her, but I doubt that’s how it’ll go down.”

On the one hand, she might like to see that he could hold his own in the ring. He would certainly like to show off a few moves for her. But then again, there were plenty of other protectors training there on any given day. He wasn’t sure he needed the competition. And knowing nothing about her story, only her obvious resistance to physical contact, he couldn’t be sure she’d appreciate the healthy sweat and tension of the gym environment.

“Probably best if I could burn off some steam before I take her sightseeing.”

“I get that.” Max nodded sagely. “Seriously Rhett, I can make a call and get someone in Chicago looking into this Gallo. Don’t forget you’ve got Upton right there on Brookwell. He’s sharp as they come on protection detail and investigations too. Unless settling down with the baker has made him soft.”

“That’s right,” Rhett said as the names clicked. “You worked with him, didn’t you?”

“For a few years.” Max nodded. “We were on several long-term protection details together. Want me to make an introduction?”

“No thanks.” Rhett kicked at a loose stone as they walked along. “We’ve met a couple of times around town. His baker, as you say, is friends with Trina.”

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Max's cell phone went off. After a quick glance, he chuckled. "Gym's out, my friend. Check your phone. You and I have lunch dates with the prettiest women in town." He bent to kiss the top of Annie's head. "And you get to tag along, sweet baby."

A moment later Rhett got a text from a number labeled as the Inn. Trina had sent him the lunch details as well.

He shouldn't be surprised. She was a quick study on the relationship game and doing a great job selling the story. Thinking ahead, he knew exactly where he wanted to take her for their first Key West date.

### Chapter Eleven

Trina would never have guessed that this instant-marriage or rescue-marriage or whatever they should call it would feel like a vacation. But it did. Her first trip to Key West was a whirlwind of wedding details layered with new friendships and discoveries.

She was loving every minute. And taking perverse delight in ignoring Luca's many calls and text messages.

Dress shopping had been a delight. She was actually excited for Rhett to see the dress tomorrow. Ilsa had driven straight to a boutique not far from the Cove. The staff had welcomed Trina warmly and she'd felt like a star trying on a variety of dresses. Once she'd made her choice, Ilsa had taken care of ordering coordinating details to outfit Rhett.

The dress—a warm white—was form-fitted through the bodice without being clingy and the longer skirt had enough detail and weight that it wouldn't get blown around in a breeze. The beading along the neckline sparkled with hints of fire like her opal ring. The style showed her curves to perfection, made her feel a smidge taller and utterly beautiful, and the color made her skin glow.

Plus, it would make a clear bridal statement without being too fussy or formal for the reception at the Cove.

She wanted to make a good impression. For Rhett's sake. The Cove staff really did admire him and appreciate his leadership. She wanted to honor that and support the man who would be her husband.

For a while anyway.

At lunch, he'd seemed pleased that they would be having a reception after the sunset ceremony. And when the pastry chef at the Cove asked them to swing by for an impromptu tasting, he was all smiles. Max had tagged along, more than happy to break any ties.

All day it seemed someone was congratulating them and welcoming her. She loved seeing how much his team and the community valued him.

With the desserts decided, Rhett must've been riding a sugar high as he hustled her over to the Key West Butterfly and Nature Conservatory. "Just in time," he said, bounding out of the car.

He took her hand without asking and she didn't mind as they entered about an hour before closing time. They walked through a gift shop that would've distracted her for hours and then a gallery with extraordinary pieces celebrating the natural beauty and colorful rainbow of butterflies.

And then they entered the garden itself and she was in awe. “This is incredible,” she whispered. She’d traveled countless places throughout her life and this leaped into her top ten list of best natural experiences. She wasn’t sure what she’d expected, only that she had been surprised to encounter so much more than the colorful butterflies flitting about from tree to leaf to flower. A pair of flamingos waded in a creek that wound through the conservatory.

“It’s so relaxing,” she continued. “I’d want to visit every day if I lived here.”

Rhett nodded, a soft smile on his face. “It’s one of my favorite places in town.”

And he’d brought her here.

A delightful fizz coursed through her system as birds chirped happily overhead, fish zipped to and fro in the water—oblivious to any possible threat—and small turtles basked on sun-drenched rocks.

She paused on the path and closed her eyes, soaking it all in so she could bring herself back to the peacefulness of this moment whenever she needed a break.

Heat radiated from Rhett as he leaned closer. “They have a live webcam you can tune into anytime.”

“Really?”

He nodded, a conspiratorial grin on his lips. “It’s bookmarked on my laptop.”

“I understand why.” The outing touched her heart deeply.

He showed her more of the quirky vibe that was a Key West evening. Having dinner at a famous dive bar on the water. Enjoying live music for a little bit before heading

down to Mallory Square to see the street performers who entertained visitors at the sunset celebration.

“This has been an incredible day,” she said as they applauded one of the musical acts. He tossed a few bills into the guitar case and deftly steered her around a crowd of boisterous tourists, closer to a unicycle acrobat. “I hope you’ve been having a good time too.”

“Absolutely.” He grinned at her. “Showing you around is like seeing it for the first time all over again.”

She ducked her head, a bit too overwhelmed by what he was implying. They were in public, yes, but no one was paying any attention to them. Was keeping up the doting-fiancé routine merely staying in practice? She wanted to ask, to clarify, just for her own sanity. Every minute with him made her want this to be real.

Real beyond the legalities.

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She felt the phone vibrate again in her purse, a harsh reminder of what had brought them here. Luca. She'd changed the setup while at the boutique so her managers could reach her through a different app with a distinct alert pattern. She couldn't leave them unsupported, but she was done with Luca's constant interruptions.

Rhett must have noticed something. "Getting tired?"

"A little. I think I'm just overwhelmed," she admitted.

"Who wouldn't be?" He meandered along, his hand available should she choose to hold it.

It was a subtle move. Only the most observant person might see it as a question. Here in this crowd no one was watching them closely. That would change at tomorrow night's reception, and when they got back to South Carolina, his family would surely watch her like a hawk.

She eased her hand into his solid warmth. His hands were strong from his hours in the boxing ring. Max had shared some fun stories of Rhett's training—both the early mishaps and the more recent successes.

Overhead, colors blazed from peach to indigo as the sun sank into the horizon. "This time tomorrow, we'll be exchanging vows," he said.

"Are we crazy?"

"I'm sure someone will say so," he admitted. "But we know what we're doing."

She hoped so. “Your parents will be in shock.” She had fond memories of Mr. and Mrs. Ellington, but Rhett marrying her—especially out of the blue like this—would turn things upside down.

“Not for long. They raised us well and emphasized the importance of being happy.”

“Will they believe I make you happy?”

He laughed. “Of course.”

She hoped his confidence proved true. More, she hoped she could match his skill at convincing others they were delighted with each other.

Tonight felt like a real date, despite her woefully limited experience. She hadn’t known Rhett could be romantic. Thoughtful and patient had not been his obvious strong suits when they were kids. Not hers either, if she were honest.

She’d been so desperate to get as far away from an unbearable situation as she could—physically and emotionally. As a result, she’d handled many things poorly that year. Everything. She’d cut communication with her parents, stopped interacting with close friends, and struggled to bond with her classmates in that French internship.

Seeing Rhett in France had both frightened and annoyed her. One more person who might look at her and know she’d been fooled by a smooth-talking, handsome young man with big ambition. Luca had talked often about his future plans, boldly including her. The daydreaming had been flattering and fun, until he’d stopped listening to her hopes, carelessly adjusting her goals to fit his plans.

If only she’d heeded the warning from her intuition, she might never have been caught in his snare at all.

“Your mind is wandering,” Rhett said as they left the excitement of Mallory Square behind.

“A little,” she confessed. As they walked along, she felt relaxed and protected with him at her side. For the first time in nearly a decade, she felt the whole story bubbling up. A strange temptation to tell him everything came over her, but he’d done so much already. He’d be tied down into their charade for months to come. He didn’t need to take all that on and her baggage too.

“I’m a good listener.”

“Hm.” She didn’t want to wreck the happy mood of the day. “You don’t seem to be fazed by any of this.” She surprised herself, leaning into him a little, savoring the tingly rush under her skin.

They crossed the street, and though plenty of people milled about, moving between various bars and restaurants, she felt as if they were in their own bubble of quiet.

“We could walk back to the Cove, but it’s a hike,” he warned. “I’ll call for a car.”

“Don’t bother.” She did a quick heel-toe move with her foot, showing off her cute wedge sandals. “These are far more comfortable than they look. I could hike ten miles.”

“I wouldn’t put you through that.” He gave her hand a light squeeze. “Before you argue, that’s not an insult. I wouldn’t put myself through that.”

She cocked her head to look at him. “You wouldn’t put yourself through walking ten miles with me or you wouldn’t put yourself through walking ten miles at all?”

He gave her a deceptively innocent look. “It can be both.”



She bumped him as he laughed outright, then her own giggles escaped. “Look at us.” She tipped her gaze to the dark sky overhead. “I guess people might believe this is the real deal after all.”

Until Rhett started visiting his sister more frequently, Trina couldn’t remember a time they could be in the same room without glowering at one another. Even a few months ago, when her Inn had hosted his family for brunch, he’d been all scowly and growly around her.

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“How often did you complain to your family about me?” she asked.

He reared back. “Never. You?”

“Not once.” Mostly because she didn’t communicate well with her parents on any issue.

“Back in school, I kept it all bottled up because I was embarrassed about the losses.” His self-deprecating smile was tangled in the shadows, but she recognized the tone. “Harper wondered why I was so peeved when you took over the Inn. Now she’s looking at the world through rose colored glasses and she’ll interpret any previous friction as interest. She’ll help convince my parents without any prompting on my part.”

“Is there interest?” She clapped her free hand over her mouth, appalled by her audacity. He was doing so much for her already. She didn’t need to force compliments out of him.

He stopped short on the sidewalk. “Yes.” Another man might’ve brought her close for an embrace, but Rhett gave her plenty of space. “Yes, Trina. Then and now, I’ve always struggled to keep my head around you.”

The words spun through her mind, not making any kind of sense. She’d made self-preserving decisions that shut her off from a great deal of intimacy, but she was in the hospitality industry. Though she hadn’t been in relationships herself, she’d witnessed more than her fair share—in nearly every facet of development or destruction.

“You mean that.”

“I do.”

Those two words brought her thoughts to a screeching halt. Tomorrow they’d exchange that vow and it would be binding. For a long time. And now, he was interested and she couldn’t promise that she could give him all the usual benefits of marriage. Maybe this was the worst idea ever—for him. Could she really put him through it?

“Rhett...” She licked her lips, forced her gaze to his eyes.

“No pressure,” he said. “You don’t have to feel the same.”

But didn’t she? She’d always found him attractive. Lately when she was close, the scent of his skin was distracting. Was that the kind of physical interest they might actually build on?

She didn’t know. Frustrated, she almost stamped her foot.

After so long shutting down that side of herself, she wasn’t sure she’d know how to handle a sexual feeling if it did occur.

He was handsome. Hot. All hard-packed muscle from his time at the gym. For the first time, she regretted closing off this piece of herself. “I feel safe with you.” Best not to mention all the warm and glowy details that went along with that declaration. “That’s new for me. And it means so much more than I can say.”

He sighed, the soft exhale caressing her cheek. “You know what I want more than any forced compliments?”

“But...” Any compliments she offered him wouldn’t be forced. Wouldn’t be hospitality 101. Wouldn’t even be rooted in gratitude—only feminine appreciation.

Her gaze fixed on his mouth, she watched his lips part and snap shut. The moment was broken by the sound of windchimes. “My phone,” he explained.

The caller had the worst timing. She was desperate to know what Rhett wanted from her.

He pulled the device from his pocket and frowned. “It’s Harper.”

She could hardly tell him to ignore his sister. As he answered, he slid his arm around her waist as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

Strangely enough it felt natural to her too. She didn’t recoil from his touch the way she had in similar situations for years.

Trina could hear Harper’s voice, but no specific words. And she was doing her best not to eavesdrop, no matter that Rhett kept her close.

“Why is that important?” Rhett’s body went tight as a wire. “Say that again?”

He quickened his pace and she had to rush a little to keep up. What a pleasant surprise to be excited by the way his body brushed against hers with every stride.

“Hold on. I’m not having this conversation in the street.” A pause. “We’re walking back from Mallory Square.” He sent Trina a smile. “Yes. I’ve been showing her around.” He sighed. “Harper, stop. I will call you back in fifteen minutes.”

“What’s wrong?” Trina asked when he ended the call.

He didn't spare her a glance, fingers flying over his phone as they hurried along. He finally met her curious gaze as they passed under a street light. "We're going to keep walking and the car will meet us. We can talk once we have privacy."

She touched his upper arm. "Please, just tell me she's okay."

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He stopped everything and looked directly into her eyes. “Yes.” He took a deep breath. “Yes, she is.”

“Good.” Harper had been through quite an ordeal recently and Trina was still on edge over it.

“You’ll have dozens of questions once we talk with Harper.”

“We?” She wanted to be clear on that. “Why?”

“Because her situation requires both of us,” he said. “It’s not a serious crisis,” he added.

“I don’t think I believe you,” she dared to admit to his face.

“Here’s the car.” The vehicle pulled to the curb and he opened the rear door for her.

She slid in and scooted across the seat, making room for him. The driver took off almost before he’d closed the door. Though she was tempted to ask more questions, the hard set of his jaw deterred her.

Their hands met on the seat between them and she marveled at how quickly she’d grown comfortable with his touch. Unexpected and wonderful, she hoped it carried on way past tomorrow’s wedding and reception. She figured the greater effort would be on her shoulders. Surprisingly she felt up to the challenge.

The driver had them back at the Cove in record time, dropping them at the employee

entrance. Within minutes they were upstairs in his suite. He had Harper on the phone before he'd thrown the deadbolt.

One lock. She admired people with that much faith in the world. It just underscored how broken she was under the surface. How suspicious she was of people in general. Not exactly the right outlook for someone in hospitality, but she'd become an expert at compartmentalizing her professional and personal life.

"Here we are. Not a minute late." Rhett said when Harper answered his call. He tapped a button. "And you're on speaker."

"You don't have to do that," Trina murmured.

"No, he really did." Harper's voice was clear.

Trina relaxed, hearing her friend sound calm and content.

"What's going on?" Trina asked.

Rhett held up a finger. "First, why does it make any difference that Trina is here with me? And how did you hear about it?"

Harper sighed. "I'm assuming you both know Luca Gallo?"

Trina crossed her arms, feeling terribly guilty. She was taking advantage of her best friend's brother. This harebrained scheme would wreck everything. "He's the latest would-be-groom my parents sent over. He arrived earlier than expected."

"Well then I'm glad you had somewhere else to be." Harper sounded pissed, but not at Trina. "Somehow, he learned our parents are friends. When you stopped taking his calls, he spent the day at Ellington properties asking for Rhett and then looking for

Dad and Mom. I guess he wants some kind of insider intel on how to win you over.

“You’re not marrying this guy,” Harper stated. “He’s got a doctorate in arrogance.”

“No, she’s not,” Rhett confirmed, though it hadn’t been a question.

“Of all the nerve!” Trina had started to curl up on one end of the couch, embarrassed and miserable, until shock and outrage rolled through her. She was on her feet, pacing back and forth. “He’s been to the hotel and resort? Looking for you?” She locked eyes with Rhett. “And your parents?”

“He claimed your staff was giving him poor service and a big song and dance about where you were.”

“Bastard!” She followed the outburst with a litany of Italian curses before she caught herself. “Pardon me.”

“None needed. I like you mad,” Rhett observed.

“Okay, enough already. What is going on with you two?” Harper demanded. “I deserve more than a vague text about you leaving early only to learn from Dr. Arrogance that you’ve left town indefinitely.”

“Three days. I told him I’d be away for three days.” Trina was pacing again. “I reminded him of that again today. That this cross-training?—”

“What?” Rhett cut her off. “You’ve spoken to Gallo today?”

“More like I’ve been ignoring his calls and texts today,” she clarified. “He was making Maria’s life hell this morning and...” Her voice trailed off. Rhett was glowering, looking as if he was ready to slay dragons barehanded.



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She didn't feel as if that barely leashed fury was aimed at her, but she proceeded with caution. "I gave Luca just enough information to back him off," she continued. "I comped him all kinds of stuff so he'd give my people a break." She stepped closer to the phone Rhett held. "I'm sorry he bothered you."

"We're fine," Harper dismissed her concerns. "If he's as close to your family as he claims, he should know that discretion and privacy are paramount. We wouldn't have told him anything even if we'd known." Harper cleared her throat. "And exactly what kind of cross-training opportunity is going on, big brother?"

"Ha. Discretion is paramount," he chirped back at her.

"Fine," Harper said. "Trina will tell me."

She looked to Rhett for guidance. "I'm sure she will tell you all about it when she gets home," Rhett replied, saving her from an outright lie.

"You're letting her meet with Ilsa," Harper accused. "What alternate universe is this? You two are oil and water and?—"

"Lighten up, Harp. It's not what you think," Rhett said.

"What should I do?" Trina resumed her pacing. "I can't kick him out of the Inn."

"Show me the phone." Rhett jerked his chin toward her purse.

She scrambled to get it for him. "I was so sure the silent treatment would've worked.

But Luca is never satisfied.” What an understatement. The man never, never accepted a no when he wanted yes to be the answer. The only choice or opinions he believed in were his own.

“We were friends through school,” she explained to Harper. “Growing up in the same neighborhood. Then I went to France and didn’t go back home after. My parents think the world of him.”

“Which is why they sent him,” Rhett grumbled.

“He’s a charmer if you’re into that sort of thing,” Harper said. “Until he doesn’t get his way. I’m surprised your parents can’t see through him.”

“To them, he’s the ideal solution to their biggest concern. Me.” She nibbled on her thumbnail. “I’m sorry he made a scene and caused you problems.”

“No, he didn’t cause us any problems at all. Besides, we didn’t have any intel to offer.” Harper’s tone dipped toward stern. “I didn’t know exactly where you were until a few minutes ago.”

Trina felt as if she was being scolded, and rightfully so. This plan was ridiculous and they’d gotten caught. Harper would be hurt and angry with her if she returned from Key West as Mrs. Rhett Ellington. Was outmaneuvering her parents worth losing her friendships? No. With her emotions in a tempest she couldn’t quite catch her breath.

“I-I’m sorry?—”

“Don’t you apologize,” Rhett snapped. “Not to anyone.”

She gaped at him. “Definitely not to me,” Harper agreed. “You’re a grown woman. Go where you please and do what you like. I called Rhett to get some guidance in

case he comes back around.”

“We’ll be home the day after tomorrow,” Rhett said. “Tell him that.”

“So this dash to the Keys is just a mini vacation between old friends?” Harper’s doubts on that theory came through loud and clear. She’d had a front row seat to more than a few challenging interactions between her brother and Trina.

“You’re welcome to feed that to Gallo,” Rhett said. “That’s basically what I told him.”

“For all the good it did,” Harper muttered. “One thing. Does that story even brush up against the truth?”

“A little,” Rhett replied. “Did you know Trina hasn’t left South Carolina since taking over the Inn?”

“I did,” Harper said. “Because I’m her friend.”

“I had a few trips planned,” Trina muttered.

“Well, I’m glad you started with this one. Take all the time you need,” Harper said. “I can’t wait to hear all about it when you get home.”

“Please, don’t let Luca bully your staff,” Trina pleaded. “And I’ll find a way to make it up to them.”

“Come on. You don’t owe anyone anything,” Harper countered. “I’ll handle him if he comes back around. You two have a great time. Love you,” she said to her brother.

“Love you,” he replied.

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The following silence seemed to fill the room, taking on a life of its own.

Rhett looked as if he might spit nails at any second. “I’m sorry,” she whispered.

“I’m not accepting apologies right now.” Rhett paced away from her. Turning abruptly on his heel, he asked. “Why didn’t you say something?”

It took her a beat to realize he was asking about Luca’s persistent, nagging messages today.

Not the past.

“Maria called me just before Ilsa and I left for the dress shop. Luca was being belligerent and haranguing my team. I thought it was handled.” She pointed to the phone Rhett had placed on the kitchen island. “You read the explanation I gave. Of course he kept calling, that’s how he is. He doesn’t accept an answer he doesn’t like.” Rhett’s eyes narrowed at her. She rushed to add, “You saw I ignored him.”

Her explanation only seemed to frustrate Rhett more. His jaw set so hard she thought it might snap and his chest puffed up as he dragged in deep slow breaths. His hands flexed loosely at his sides.

Remarkably, she wasn’t afraid for herself. Something about Rhett reached inside her and underscored that ultimately she was safe with him, even in a temper. He would never hurt her.

She found his fuming way too enticing, his appeal amplified. What was wrong with

her?

“I suppose we should call this off.” She managed to say the words. Before he felt obligated to withdraw his support.

“That sounds like another attempt at an apology.” He stepped closer. “I don’t want it.”

Knowing she was safe, believing in his integrity, a shiver rattled through her. Some previously untapped strength of will held her in place, despite her watery knees. “Then what do you want?”

## Chapter Twelve

What did he want?

The whole story. A kiss. Her trust. And that was just the beginning of a list that was growing longer by the minute.

Rhett didn’t say any of that. He couldn’t answer her at all without taking another calming breath. He was more thankful than ever for Max’s training and the discipline he’d learned at the gym this past year.

He felt himself teetering on the edge of scaring her and he fought hard to dial it back. The way she stood there holding her ground, her chin up and her eyes defiant, made him proud.

Weird. Possibly inappropriate. She didn’t need him to be proud of her, but there it was anyway.

“Those messages from Gallo aren’t benign,” he began. “I’m angry with him, not

you.”

“I’m angry with him too.” The tension eased from her jaw. “He arrived days early and he’s been a jerk when I refused to change my schedule.”

“That’s not the half of it,” he grumbled.

She couldn’t possibly have read those messages. How could he help her without instilling more fear?

On the one hand, he was grateful, on the other... he worried. There was so much more to this than she was telling him. Maybe more than she knew. Everything inside him clamored for the whole story of her history with Gallo. Of his connection to her parents. There was a threat here. He could feel it, but how could he learn the details without invading her privacy?

“What kind of family friend is this pushy?” He decided it was best to start there.

“Luca Gallo,” she said with a quick nod.

Good grief, her curls were adorable and distracting when they bounced along with her expressive movements. He had a flash—not for the first time—of what those curls, her deep dark eyes, and that curvy body would be like in bed. He shoved his errant thoughts aside before he scared her in a whole new way.

“Your parents know him well,” he said. “They must trust him to have given out what amounts to your home address.”

“Yes to both.” She pressed her lips together and swallowed hard. “You’ve been wonderful, but I can’t ask you to do any more for me. You gave me the breathing room I needed to get my head on straight. I’ll go back and deal with this.”

“Deal with Gallo?”

“Yes.” She folded her arms, her earlier defiance already crumbling. “And my parents.”

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“That’s a load of crap.” It came out a whole lot meaner than intended.

But she didn’t flinch. She laughed. A big loud belly laugh that he didn’t know what to do with. Had to be a coping mechanism. “Did I say something funny?”

“I guess so,” she managed when she caught her breath.

She dropped down into the deep cushions of his couch and toed off her shoes. He tried not to dwell on those sweetly painted toenails. She was a study in contrasts. “Just because I haven’t, doesn’t mean I can’t.”

“True,” he allowed cautiously. He glanced at her work phone. “If that’s your choice, I’ll go back with you.”

“Rhett, please.” She rubbed her temples. “This is my mess. You tried to help, but it’s my job to go back and clean it up. I have to set the, ah, boundaries,” she finished with a snap of her fingers.

“You’re rattled,” he observed. “You never miss a word in English.”

“I’m frustrated that they won’t listen, yes,” she admitted.

He propped a hip on the big arm of the couch and watched her where she was tucked in on the opposite end. Hopefully, he looked more relaxed than he felt. He was strung tighter than a bow, looking for the best way to tackle what felt like a serious enemy.

“Do you trust me?”



She flung an arm wide. “I wouldn’t be here otherwise.”

Good. “Tell me how you would clean it up.” Did she realize she was twisting the opal engagement ring back and forth on her finger?

“I will go back and do what I should have done at the start. I will tell Luca to go home.” She nibbled on her lip. “I will make it clear that I’m not interested in marriage.” She sniffed. “After that, I will call my parents and tell them to stop. I don’t need them to arrange a marriage for me. I’m probably not mature enough for one anyway.”

“That last is another load of crap,” he muttered.

Her smile lit up the room. “I do like the way you call me out.”

“First time for everything.” Still, it made him happy to hear her say it.

She shrugged. “You’ve heard my plan. I’ll go book my ticket.” She started to rise, no doubt going for the cell phone on the counter.

“In a minute.” It was all he could do to sit still when he wanted to pull her into his arms. To use his body to convey the feelings he wasn’t sure he could safely put into words. Not the time for that test. “If going back is the right answer, we’ll go together.”

“You’ve done enough.”

He hadn’t even gotten started. “You shared your plan. Let me offer the counterpoint. First, if we skip the wedding, Ilsa would be crushed. The people here at the Cove looking forward to a party tomorrow night will be disappointed.”

“So have the party,” she suggested. “Celebrate the near miss.”

Did she have to be so contrary? “A wedding reception without a wedding or a bride. Huh.” He tipped his head to the side. “I’m sure it’s happened.”

“Definitely happened.” Trina smiled. “At a property I managed for a time.” Her eyes twinkled over the memory. “The party was quite lovely. Everybody had a delightful time and the hotel received a wave of positive reviews.”

“You have a way of finding a silver lining,” he murmured.

“My hidden talent.”

Not so hidden. She’d spun gold from straw for his family after a fire destroyed a chunk of their coastal resort in South Carolina, hosting the weekly Ellington family brunch at the Inn until their own space was rebuilt.

“To continue, I skimmed those messages from Gallo.” He lifted his chin toward the cell phone on the countertop. “I’m asking you to please, see this through. The wedding, the reception. Returning home with a husband in tow strengthens your position and will make it easier to set those boundaries.”

“Are you just being a man?”

“I sure as hell hope so.” Restless, he shoved to his feet. Started pacing. “You know Gallo better than I do, but I don’t think you should face him alone. Definitely not alone and single.”

She shivered.

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“He scares you.” He held up a hand. “Don’t even try to deny it. I saw your face.”

“Yes. But that’s in the past. I’m an adult.”

“Adults can be scared,” he allowed. At the moment, he was scared she’d shut him out when she needed him most. “This is an opportunity to be smart about how you handle that fear.”

Her deep eyes were locked on him. “I’m listening.”

He didn’t linger on the quick win. “Remember, I’ve known you for some time. If it were as easy as telling him no or telling your parents to back off, you wouldn’t be in this predicament. Either you like the drama?—”

Her brows snapped together. “Absolutely not.”

“Didn’t think so. So you need some backup to get through this.”

Her shoulders slumped and she curled in on herself. “So you want me to stay.”

So. Much. “Yes. I want you to stay. I want us to get married. To celebrate at the reception.” Because he intended for a slew of wedding pictures to blow up on social media before they returned to Brookwell.

She might not like his tactics but she would thank him later. With any luck at all, the social proof would send Gallo running back to Italy in shame.

There was a serious problem in their past. One he wasn't thrilled to dwell on, as his imagination tended toward dark and ugly explanations. He still hoped that when she finally told him the whole story it wouldn't be nearly as bad as he feared.

"And then I'll stay with you, in Brookwell, as your husband."

"Hm."

That sound was way too sexy and she had no idea how it fired him up. If she ever learned, she'd have a giant advantage in their relationship.

"I have one additional request," he said. At her nod, he continued, "I'd like to dig a little deeper into Gallo's intentions. You haven't read the messages, but the tone worries me."

"Now you are just being a man." She flicked away his concern. "There's no reason for jealousy."

"I know that," he said, teeth clenched. "I'm asking, Trina. But I might not wait for actual permission."

Her lips parted and her eyes filled with worry once again. "The tone is that bad?" she whispered.

"In my opinion, yes. If I could do some digging, it's likely to put my mind at ease." That was as close as he'd come to lying to her. Because he planned to have Max send the information to the Guardian Agency research team for analysis. They were probably already getting started. Thanks to their partnership with the Ellington properties, security concerns were addressed immediately. If they cleared Gallo's actions as nonsense, he'd let it go. Though he wouldn't let her face the man alone. Never again.

“All right. But I have one condition,” she added before he could celebrate.

She walked over until she stood right in front of him, chin lifted. He admired that edge of determination, the glint in her dark eyes. “Tell me what’s in it for you. The truth.”

He was pretty sure the full scope of his truth would scare her. He would need to tiptoe carefully down this path. He was invested in this course to protect her, yes. But he also craved the right to touch her, to wind his fingers through her silky curls and taste her full lips. To breathe her in and feel her soft curves and warm skin against his body.

Of course, that wasn’t at all the relationship they were talking about. Still, he was pretty sure it would be enough for him just to be the person she needed in laughter or fight. He’d been searching for so long for a worthy focus outside of himself and the business that demanded so much of his time.

Trina was that worthy focus. Even if they never managed a traditional marriage, he was confident they could create something special.

“Rhett?” she prompted. “Is the truth so difficult?”

“No. There’s so much, I don’t know where to start,” he replied. “The truth is I am attracted to you. Have been from the start.”

She wrinkled her nose. “What nonsense. I must’ve been eight when we met.”

He rolled his eyes. “Okay, maybe not from the start.” He tried to laugh it off. Tried to hide how deeply she affected him. “I meant in school.”

“No, no.” She folded her arms over her chest. “You hated me when we were in

France.”

“Well, you weren’t too fond of me either,” he reminded her.

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“I-I had reasons. But this, here and now,” she tapped her foot, “is about you. Please tell me what’s in it for you. I feel this situation is terribly one-sided.

“Why can’t you accept that it’s good teamwork? We’re supporting each other.”

“How?” she insisted. “How would our wedding equate to me supporting you?”

If she couldn’t accept his sincere attraction as a starting point, he had to find an alternative. He latched onto the only excuse that fit. “My mom has been pushing me to find a nice girl and settle down. As your husband, I’ll buffer you from your parents and you’ll be doing the same thing for me.”

On a much smaller scale, of course, but he wouldn’t mess up a good answer.

This unexpected opportunity was a chance to be close to someone. All his life, he’d made friends easily. Deep relationships were more of a struggle. Romance? Well, dating seemed to get all twisted up in a hurry and instead of improving, only grew more complicated in recent years. Most women liked to go out and be seen with him, hoping to juice up their influencer status. Sometimes, it was worse and they were clearly after the fortune they believed he controlled. He didn’t like going out with one eye watching for a woman’s true motive to reveal itself. He was becoming cynical and he wasn’t sure how to reset the way he viewed the world and romance. A man couldn’t go through life expecting the worst from the person closest to him.

Trina was different. Just as he called her out, he had a feeling she would quickly cure him of his jaded attitude. She wasn’t a random date, she was a known quantity. This was his chance to develop something sincere and true. The circumstances were

unexpected, but it didn't matter. He was heart and soul invested in her and he was sure they could find happiness together.

Whatever she had endured, he wanted to make it better.

"Hm." She tapped a finger to her lips, then smiled at him. "That I understand. Harper and I were sure you weren't getting the pressure our parents were putting on us."

"Well." His gaze dipped to her mouth and he jerked it back up to her eyes. "I do my best to keep the focus and pressure on her," he admitted. Her quick laugh was a wonderful reward. "But I've been getting an earful lately about my duty to the family line."

Trina shook her head. "Sometimes I think my parents are locked in a time capsule. It's absurd. There is more to life than procreation."

The stubborn set of her mouth made him smile. "True enough. Are you satisfied?"

She sucked in a quick breath, her eyes going wide and this time, her gaze fell to his mouth.

"By my answer," he said deliberately. He shouldn't provoke her, but he couldn't seem to help himself.

"Yes." She straightened her shoulders. "What you've said makes me feel better."

Spoken by the woman who clearly was not interested in him in all the ways he was interested in her. It would worry him more if he was convinced it was a lost cause.

But occasionally, he saw glimmers of attraction. He could build on that. Slowly. Over time. He wished she'd tell him the whole story about Gallo. "I have a question."



“Yes?”

“Will you tell me what happened with Gallo?” At her gasp, he rushed on, “Not tonight. Once I’ve earned your trust. We have plenty of time. It’s not like we’re going to tell anyone the truth of our arrangement within weeks of the wedding.”

“Please, no. That would backfire,” she agreed. “Luca has embarrassed me enough for one lifetime. I won’t let him take credit for my first short marriage too.”

Rhett had to work to keep his reactions under control. It was more confirmation of his worst fears. He had to warn her of his suspicions. “We won’t let that happen. Though you should know that his behavior today has surely drawn attention. Being a jerk at Ellington properties is a fast way to get on the Guardian Agency watch list. They take Ellington security seriously.”

“But I’m not an Ellington,” she said.

“You will be in less than twenty-four hours,” he reminded her.

Her lips formed a perfect “O” that he found way too tempting. He cleared his throat and moved toward the kitchen. Standing so close to her tested his restraint. He didn’t want to give her any reason to ever be wary of him.

“I’ll turn in.” He slipped her business phone into his pocket. She could stay connected with her staff through email on her laptop. “Do you need anything?”

“There won’t be a rehearsal of any kind, right?” she asked, still standing in front of the couch.

“Do you think we need one? The captain will walk us through while we sail. And Ilisa will be right there if something comes up. It’s just going to be the four of us and the

crew.”

She chewed on her lip. “And a photographer, yes?”

“Yes.” What was worrying her? “And we’ll have candid shots from Ilsa and Max too.”

She exhaled sharply. “I just need to say it.” She stared him down. “The captain will tell us to kiss, right? The ‘you may kiss the bride’ line at the end.”

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His entire body went on alert. “Yes. Unless we ask him not to.” He was primed, every cell in his body, already eager for that kiss. Until she sagged with relief. “We’ll tell him to skip it,” he said in a rush. “Couples who elope don’t usually have the event as well documented as we will anyway.”

She rubbed her palms on her hips. “No, Rhett. He can’t skip it.” Once more, she was walking toward him. “Just kiss me. I need to get comfortable with it.”

He was frozen, rooted to the spot. “Not for me,” he said, ignoring the voice in his head that was clamoring for her attention and affection.

“Yes. For both of us. Please. Ilsa and Max might have suspicions about our story, but we can’t allow anyone else to have doubts.” Her tongue slid over her rosy lips. “I trust you, Rhett, or I wouldn’t be here.” She smiled, the expression fraught. “You may kiss the bride.”

She was adorable. Her face tipped up and her lips puckered. Her eyes were not closed. No, she was watching him carefully. Her claims of trust were weak at best. He didn’t fault her for it, but he sure wouldn’t let her down.

“We’ll probably be holding hands at that point,” he said. He’d been at a buddy’s wedding a few months back and after the exchange of rings they continued to hold hands when the minister said those very words.

You may kiss the bride.

She offered her hands to him. “Okay, go.”

He supported her hands, felt the hint of a tremor. “You’re sure? Because we really don’t?—”

“Do it already,” she demanded.

“Yes ma’am.” With her watching his every move, he slowly bent his head, giving her plenty of time to pull away or call a halt before his lips touched hers.

He took stock of every detail, the incredible depths of her brown eyes, her shallow breaths, the sweet softness of her lips.

The bolt of awareness shot through him, shocking and soothing at the same time. That was brand new. And far more inspiring than a brief, innocent kiss should be.

He eased back, his gaze still locked with hers. “Will that work?”

Her tongue slipped over her lips again. “Yes. Thanks.”

“Okay.” He tucked his hands in his pockets. It was the only way to keep from touching her. “Good night, Trina.”

“Good night,” her response floated softly behind him.

Although his suite was roomy, he heard every sound as she got ready for bed, including the squeak of his mattress springs. Every sound amped up his desire, left him aching for more. In an unlikely decision that startled him even as it settled on his heart, he vowed to win her over. And make this marriage real.

## Chapter Thirteen

Trina had had a remarkably restful night. When her alarm went off, she hopped out of

bed in a great mood. She refused to blame it all on that amazing kiss, though she knew it was a factor.

It was her wedding day. For a woman who had been convinced she had the worst luck with men, Rhett was proving her wrong at every opportunity. Nothing more unlikely had ever created so much happiness.

She pulled on a t-shirt and shorts and hustled out to the kitchen. Driven by a need to give back, she'd contacted the concierge last night. Groceries would be delivered any minute and she would make breakfast for her soon-to-be-husband. Incredible, but true.

Her kitchen skills wouldn't pass for expert-level, but she had invested time to get really good at a few dishes. Working from the recipe in her head, she had the frittata nearly done by the time Rhett joined her in the kitchen, smelling fresh and clean from his shower.

"You made breakfast?" He stared at her. "I thought you were just setting up a room service delivery."

Had she made a misstep? Suddenly unsure, she avoided his gaze. "Is it a problem that I cooked?" She handed him a cup of strong black coffee. He might be better at selling the story, but she'd been paying attention. Because she did care about him as a friend at the very least.

Her lips tingled with the memory of the way he'd kissed her, refusing to let her get away with the white lie inside her head.

The main reason they'd been rivals came down to her fears and the pain she carried all by herself. She had to own that, though she didn't believe she had to confess everything to him right here over breakfast. But she wanted to change the dynamic so

that when this ended they could still be friends.

One brief kiss had shifted her focus, given her another idea. Would Rhett be patient enough to help her break down the walls she had built up to protect herself?

Would he even be interested? He'd said he was attracted to her, but could he mean it?

"No, not at all."

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She did a double take, thinking he was answering the question in her head. If she'd said the words out loud, she'd be mortified. He was studying her over the rim of his coffee cup and she scrambled to act normal.

"I'm just surprised," Rhett continued. "It smells incredible. I'm sure it'll be a thousand times better than room service."

"Maybe not a thousand." She smiled at his enthusiasm. "I've always had an easier time cooking when room service is a convenient backup plan."

"Well, it'll be perfect, I'm sure. But so much work? I didn't want you to lift a finger, especially not today."

"You deserve far more than a simple breakfast. Legal marriage is no small thing. You know I would've been happy pretending."

"Until it blew up in your face."

"True," she agreed. "But this is a serious obligation and I know we've covered it. I know you're okay. I just wanted to do something nice."

Finally, a warm smile brightened his face and the tension pinching the back of her neck smoothed away.

"I can't wait to dig in, thank you." He moved a little closer to check the pan, without crowding her or even touching her. "And when you're ready to talk about anything, I'll listen."

She nodded. Not a chance she'd let Luca intrude on the day ahead of them. Tucking a wayward curl behind her ear, she shooed him aside so she could serve.

Rhett dug in, eating for several minutes in silence. He paused for a slug of coffee and then grinned at her. "This is delicious, Trina. Thank you."

"You're welcome!" His enthusiasm made her happy. She wanted to create fun and happy memories all day long today.

"Is this a family recipe?"

"Yes." She smiled, thinking back. "My grandfather used to love to make breakfast. Whenever I visited, he would let me help and we would try and surprise Nonna. They had the best garden."

"That's wonderful." He got up to refill his coffee. "I've often envied you growing up in Europe. It always seemed so idyllic. Way better than dinky South Carolina."

She laughed. "Home is home, right? And the grass is always greener elsewhere. I couldn't wait to get out and see the world on my own terms."

"True. But you like living in South Carolina?"

"I love it. I hope I never have to leave." She chased the last bite of frittata around her plate.

"Another espresso?" he offered.

She held up a hand. "No, thank you."

Hedished up another helping from the skillet to his plate. "Seconds?"



“Half, please.” Yesterday she had been too nervous to eat much of anything and today she was starving. As they fueled up, she marveled over how easy it was to sit here with him, as if they’d been friends for years, rather than bitter competitors.

“So what do you want to do today?” he asked once he’d cleaned his plate for the second time. “After my staff meeting.”

“Beyond getting ready for the wedding?”

He shrugged that off. “We have hours yet. We could take a walk on the beach or check out a museum. And you’ve come this far, we have to visit the Mile Marker Zero. It’s a great spot for selfies.”

“I can’t tell if you’re kidding.”

He leaned back against the counter, watching her. “I’m serious. There isn’t much work after my morning meeting.”

“Won’t your staff be upset that you’re leaving?”

“On my wedding day?” He snorted. “Besides, I’m only shifting to a hybrid approach. They’ll probably love not having me underfoot, spouting off new ideas every week.”

She knew better. It was plain to see how much the staff here admired him.

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“I’ll be back in person every couple of weeks as needed. More often if some sort of crisis pops up. I’m telling you, this crew is a well-oiled machine. My people know what to do.”

“Is it an awful thing if I asked to sit in on your meeting?” She wanted to see his leadership in person. At his scowl, she immediately back pedaled. “Not to intrude. I won’t say a word. I just want to see a different management perspective. Harper and I have talked about how she does things, but I’d hate to miss a chance to see you in action.”

His brows lifted toward his hairline. “I’m not sure if I should be flattered or cautious.”

“Flattered, of course. Why the doubt?”

He set his coffee aside and leaned on the edge of the island. “Because I’m staring at the hospitality queen,” he teased.

When he looked at her, his eyes glinting with amusement, she felt so close to him. So close to something wonderful. She would bring this moment to mind when it was time to kiss him after they exchanged vows and rings.

She ignored his compliment, her mind on work once more. “I would like to brainstorm some ideas. Ways to bring in local foot traffic, not just to benefit the Inn, but also the island in general.”

He bobbed his chin. “We can brainstorm and do touristy things at the same time. And

of course you can sit in on my meeting. It'll give me a chance to introduce you."

Happy with the plan, she started cleaning up. "Not a chance," Rhett waved her off. "My strongest kitchen skill is cleanup duty."

She returned to the bedroom in search of an outfit that would bridge both a professional meeting and the touristy things that would follow. She was halfway dressed in a funky wrap top and pattern skirt when the Inn phone started ringing. She'd checked her email earlier and Maria had assured her everything was under control.

She followed the sound and found the device in Rhett's office. "Good morning, Maria. Is everything all right?"

"Yes, ma?—"

She heard a scuffle and then, "Trina! Trina, my darling! You didn't call back."

Luca. Her vision hazed and she nearly bobbed the phone. "Luca, this is highly inappropriate." Following her instincts, she went to find Rhett. "I'm working."

"No, no," he argued. "You're toying with me."

"I'm not." She hated that her voice felt tight in her throat. She was a professional. Damn it. Rhett had told her she could be scared and smart. She needed backup.

While Luca rambled on in his syrup-coated voice, she found Rhett at the kitchen island. He looked up from his laptop and whatever he saw on her face brought him to his feet. Just having him there, braced for anything, gave her an instant boost of courage. She was a grown woman—stronger now than she'd been as a teenager. She swallowed, pushing down all those old insecurities.

“Luca, I am working,” she began again. At Rhett’s signal she put the phone on speaker.

“Trina, you work too hard. I’m here. Stop playing. I came all this way for you.”

She feared that was exactly what he had done. “I wasn’t even expecting you this early. I cannot change my schedule.”

“Nonsense. What is early among friends? Your parents tell me America is pushing you too hard. You need a break. Relaxing time, yes? Come out with me this evening.”

“I’m not available,” she said. “Not this evening.” Her gaze dropped to the opal engagement ring on her finger. “Not anytime soon,” she added. “My work is demanding, Luca.”

“No, no. We have much catching up to do. We’ll have more than dinner, my darling.”

She didn’t like the sharp edge creeping into his tone. Or the icy fingers dancing down her spine. When Rhett opened his mouth, she pressed her fingertips to his lips and shook her head.

He gave her a warning glare. He wouldn’t let this continue unchecked. She appreciated his protectiveness, but she needed to make Luca understand. Better still if she could do it without any extra drama. “I have meetings all day and being late is bad form.”

“You work too hard, my darling. Once we sort this out, you will love your life. As your mother says, you and I are meant to be.”

Rhett glowered now and she suspected her expression matched his. “I love my life as

it is right now,” she stated. “I love my career and my role at the Inn. If you can’t accept that, I understand if you go back early. Your time is valuable.”

“So is yours,” Rhett whispered.

“What was that? Who is there?” Luca demanded.

“I have no idea. I’m at a professional event,” she said with as much attitude as she could muster. “Ciao!”

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“Wait, my darling. You cannot be angry with me for my concern. You are worth the wait. What a tragedy it would be to have come all this way and not spend a moment with you. I will wait, my love.”

Rhett bristled once more. “Say it again.”

“Good bye, Luca.” She quickly ended the call before Rhett lost his temper and threatened Luca with bodily harm.

“What the hell was that?” he demanded. “How did he get through?”

“Maria called and I answered.” She planted her hands on her hips. “How could I not after yesterday? He wrestled the phone from her hand.”

“I’ll kill him.”

“You won’t.” The phone hummed in her hand. She glanced down and then turned the device to show the text message to Rhett.

“I feel sorry for your managers,” he grumbled.

“That makes two of us.” Belatedly realizing she still held his wrist, she released him. “Thanks for the moral support.”

Standing so close, his gaze dropped, just for a second. The flare of heat in his gaze startled her, until she remembered her shirt open, her bra on full display. Embarrassed, she clutched the fabric to cover herself. “Oh, my God. I’m so sorry,

excuse me..." In her haste, she dropped the phone.

And he caught it.

"Take your time," his voice trailed after her. "They can't start the meeting without me and I'm not going anywhere without you."

"That's silly. Why don't you go ahead? I'll come meet you once I get myself pulled together."

Literally pulled together. She straightened the top and tied it at the side. She couldn't believe she'd been standing there in her bra in front of him.

While Luca made noises about a future that scared the hell out of her.

"We'll go together, or I'll reschedule."

The nerve. He knew she'd feel worse if he did that.

If only she had the time to redo her makeup, she'd splash some water on her face. Her cheeks were so hot, she thought they might never cool down.

"Rhett?"

"Right here." He stood in the bedroom doorway, his back to her. "You doing okay?"

"Not even a little bit," she blurted without thinking. "I can't believe this. I—you." She fanned herself with both hands. "I'm so embarrassed."

"Please, don't be."

“You must think I was?—”

“Flustered,” he supplied. “You handled it like a champ. Like a professional.”

“He’s a pain in the ass and we both know it,” she grouched. “I swear he took arrogance classes from Antonio.”

“Want to tell me what he did before stealing the phone from Maria this morning?” Rhett dared her to talk with one raised eyebrow.

“Definitely not the day for that, thank you.”

“I got an email from Harper this morning. The Guardian Agency is digging in. It wouldn’t break my heart to make their job easier.”

She gulped as she pulled on another pair of wedge sandals. Whatever they found wouldn’t involve her beyond the documented facts of being raised in the same neighborhood. Any information she added to that wouldn’t change anything. She hadn’t filed a report at the time and it was years past the legal window to do so.

She smoothed lipstick over her lips and fluffed her hair around the headband. “I’m ready. I haven’t made us horribly late, have I?”



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He straightened, seemingly filling the wide doorway. “No.” His gaze roamed from her head to her toes and back. When Rhett did that, it felt like a warm caress as opposed to being ogled. “You look lovely. No one would blame me if I rescheduled the whole damn meeting.”

“Nonsense.” This time when her cheeks heated, it felt wonderful. “We had a plan for the day.”

“Let me call in a favor and get Luca evicted from the Inn.”

“That sounds amazing,” she admitted. “Let’s discuss it after your meeting.”

Seeing no other way, she hooked her hand through his elbow and steered him out into the main suite. He grabbed his laptop and they headed over to the conference room.

While he conducted his meeting, she could come up with another excuse to keep her secrets buried. If she didn’t have to share her darkest, most appalling story, she wouldn’t. While they were off to a good start, Rhett wouldn’t be her husband forever and therefore he shouldn’t bear all of her emotional baggage.

She didn’t want to look too closely at why that made her sad.

### Chapter Fourteen

Rhett was livid with Luca’s intrusion on what had been a delightful morning. That ridiculous call had thrown Trina into such a tizzy, she’d come out of the bedroom half dressed. He hadn’t had a moment to congratulate her on handling the jerk so well

before she noticed her disarray and rushed off, embarrassed and uneasy again.

If he ever had a chance, he'd punch Gallo into next week. No, that wasn't exactly the lesson he should be taking from his boxing training, but it's what he felt and he wouldn't shy away from it. Definitely not in the privacy of his own thoughts.

And thanks to the awful vibe, he felt guilty that he couldn't do the polite thing and banish the memory of her breasts filling the lace cups of her bra. That sensual glimpse would fuel his fantasies for quite some time. He found her generous curves irresistible and the sexy scent of her skin even more so. What he wouldn't give to tell her all the ways he'd love to touch her.

If she could accept him.

She seemed to think he was doing all the sacrificing here, but having her close was exciting and fun. Talking with her, watching her mind work, was fascinating. She understood the demands of the industry better than anyone he'd dated.

And here he was, stuck in a tentative limbo on his wedding day, because Luca had crossed the line way back when.

The more time Rhett spent with Trina, the more he understood she was working day by day to overcome an assault. It was the most likely explanation for her general uneasiness with physical contact and her jerky, fearful reactions when someone crowded her.

Not that he'd let that happen while they were together.

When he thought back to their time in France, he cursed himself for not recognizing the signs. Granted, he'd been a kid. Too self-absorbed with his own goals to attempt to understand why she was behaving differently. Instead, he allowed his battered

pride and ego to fuel the divide when he should've shown compassion and concern for a family friend.

Only hindsight offered perfect vision.

He would find a way to make it up to her. Not that he could actually fix anything after all these years, but there had to be a way to make her future brighter. Well, marrying her was a good start.

She kept asking what was in it for him. Redemption was one hell of a reason. But it wasn't the only reason. In little more than twenty-four hours, she'd changed his perspective. Trina made life brighter, made him seek out the happier moments. He'd almost stopped believing there was someone out there he could share a life with.

Under the guise of making notes during the staff meeting, he sent a text to Max providing Gallo's full name, the town where Trina was raised, and the dates just ahead of her arrival in France. It was the best place for the Guardian Agency researchers to start hunting for the root cause of Trina's trouble with the jerk.

Rhett requested that he not be told about anything they found unless it was an immediate security concern. When he heard Trina's story, it would be from her and no one else. As for security, he figured as long as they were in Key West she was out of Gallo's reach.

He wished he could keep her here until Gallo gave up, but that didn't seem likely.

After that email was sent, he reached out to his own Guardian Agency team downstairs and asked them to get things rolling on additional security in and around the Brookwell Inn. Her security team was solid, but he wanted additional undercover folks in place before they returned.

With his personal concerns handled, he returned his full attention to the staff meeting. Nothing unexpected popped up and soon they were done. As promised, Trina hadn't said a word. When it ended, and his staff swarmed them with congratulations and well-wishes, she was all grace and warm chatter. He couldn't have scripted a better bride.

Not that he'd ever thought to do so.

Eventually everyone filed out, expressing their excitement about tonight's reception. "You're holding up well," he murmured.

Trina smiled up at him and she positively glowed. "You make it easy." She snuck a glance at her smart watch.

He braced for more bad news. "What now?"

"Nothing at all." She shocked him, wrapping her hand around his arm. "You promised me some touristy fun and brainstorming time."

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“Yes, I did.” He dropped off his things at his office and locked the door. “Are you allergic to cats?”

Her eyes lit up. “The Hemingway House?” She bounced on her toes. “Yes, please.”

“That was easy,” he said with a laugh. He was happy to see her so enthused. “Let’s go.”

He had a car take them over to what had been the residence of one of the most famous authors in history. They joined the next available guided tour and at every turn she seemed more excited.

At the writing room, she surprised him, tearing up a little. “Can you believe all of the creativity here? The stories and his process.” She pressed a hand to her heart.

“I didn’t know you wanted to write.” He filed it away. Anticipating her reaction if he gifted her a writer’s experience at the Hemingway house. What a thrill he’d have to give her something so meaningful.

“Oh, no. I don’t have those talents.”

His bubble burst.

She sighed heavily, her gaze dreamy. “But Gentry Carver does. He did an author experience here and said it changed everything about his storytelling.”

Who the hell was she talking about? He let her ramble on quietly for a few more

minutes about inspiration and muse until he couldn't take it anymore. He had never seen her so animated or so enthused about a man. It didn't sound as if she'd had a relationship with him, but he'd bet his shares in Ellington that she wanted one.

"I'm hoping he'll do a reading at the tea room?—"

That did it. "Who the hell are you talking about?"

"The author. Gentry Carver. Oh my goodness." She touched Rhett's biceps. "You haven't read him? You really should." She cocked her head and stared at him. "I can't believe you don't know the name. Your uncle Bruce is just as crazy about him as I am."

That eased his aggravation a bit. "I guess I don't talk to Uncle Bruce about books."

"Oh you should," she said. "His books will sweep you off your feet. When we get back I know just the book you should start with."

With a skeptical grunt he guided her out into the gardens, hoping the colorful views, the cats, and of course the famous pool would distract her from her fangirling. He wasn't too proud to admit he wanted all of her attention.

Selfish, but it was their wedding day.

None of his efforts were effective. She continued to sing the praises of this man. While she went on and on, Rhett pulled out his phone and looked him up. He'd been hoping for some gray-haired old man, but what he found was a guy probably not yet forty. Dark hair, serious brown eyes, and a strong jaw outlined by a well-trimmed beard. The man clearly worked out, based on the website gallery showing off photos from an array of adventures and research travels.

It struck him that the author would have made an ideal groom for Trina. Both world travelers, big readers, and likely more shared interests. Thinking about it made him queasy.

Rhett skimmed through the tour dates for the author's latest release, shocked to see Brookwell on the list of stops. "He's coming to Brookwell?"

"Yes!" She bounced on her toes. "Next month. I have tickets. Bruce and I are so excited. Harper gave him her ticket. We won them during trivia. The book signing is open to the public, but we get special time with him beforehand."

"How nice for you," he deadpanned.

His sarcasm sailed right over her head as Trina continued, "He's just back from Greece. He was doing research for a new book."

"How do you know that?" More importantly, why was he so jealous of a stranger?

"I'm on his newsletter list," she said as if it was the most logical thing in the world. "I get emails every couple of weeks."

"You have a crush on him." He regretted the outburst immediately when she went still, the sparkle fading from her eyes. "Trina, I didn't mean anything."

"No, you're right." She flapped her hand, apparently waving away any offense.

He wasn't sure if he believed her or if this was just some kind of protective habit she developed that everyone bought into.

"Rhett, are you jealous?"

“You don’t have to sound quite so pleased about it.”



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“Maybe I do.” She slipped her arm through his as if touching him was an everyday occurrence.

It was a struggle to keep his shock in check. “As long as that ‘I do’ is more than a maybe in a few hours.”

“I promise it will be.” Her mouth tilted up at one corner. “If you think I go on and on about Gentry Carver, you really need to talk to Uncle Bruce.”

He liked hearing her refer to Bruce as if he was her uncle as well. Within a few hours he would be by marriage. Rhett imagined Bruce would laugh it up and be completely delighted with the prospect.

It was the first time Rhett really considered what the family would think when they heard the news. If he was smart, he would give them a warning. Then again, a warning might undermine any claims of eloping for the sake of instantly, unexpectedly falling in love.

“Did you see they have wedding packages here too?” she asked as they strolled around the Hemingway grounds.

“Ilsa will be heartbroken if you change our plans now.”

“I wasn’t thinking about us,” she said. “We have wedding packages at the Inn,” Trina said. “Nothing as elaborate as you can do here. You have so many more options.”

“Harper runs up against the same thing when she tries to compete with me.”

Trina sent him a scolding look. “I don’t need to compete with you. The Inn and the Cove are two very different properties. It’s easier for me to incorporate the community businesses in our package plans and our day-to-day efforts. I want to get better at that integration.”

“There are times when I’ve wondered how you manage a community-held property. I think having so many cooks in the kitchen would drive me nuts.”

She wrinkled her nose. “It’s not like that. The board meetings are easier than anything I deal with on the family side.”

“I thought your dad was pretty chill in the boardroom,” Rhett said. “Granted I was only there a time or two.”

She stared at him, her brow furrowed. “That’s right. During a summer visit. My mother must have dragged you and your sister through every tourist trap in Italy.”

“Except for boardroom day,” he said. “I got to go with Dad because I was almost a grown up,” he said. “You and Harper were too young.”

She laughed. “And glad of it. We were happy enough to enjoy the pool while you wore a suit in the boardroom.”

He chuckled. “I didn’t get sunburned. Marco ran a tight meeting that day.”

“I’m sure he did. He doesn’t tolerate distractions or tangents.”

She paused and he followed her gaze across the street. A young family was negotiating an ice cream cone with a toddler. The soft smile on her face was nothing short of maternal envy.

Why didn't that bug him? He was single—for a few more hours. He'd thought for sure it was better to leave the next generation of Ellingtons to Harper. Now that she had Knox, his plan was stronger than ever.

But something about that expression on Trina's face made him want to get closer. Could he convince her to give their marriage a real shot? After all, they'd have at least a year together. Why not do it right?

That kiss had been a tiny spark ready to flare into an inferno.

But he sensed he was the only one ready for that affection acceleration. He didn't mind being patient. Trina was worth the wait. He nearly laughed, thinking about how weird it was that they'd have a more affectionate public relationship and he'd be locked in the friend zone in private.

Though the marriage would be real on paper from the start, unless she was willing to change the agreement, their union would come to an end sooner rather than later. Could he convince her? Was it even fair to try?

All he could do was show her the potential. He'd make himself available to whatever intimacy she wanted to explore. And as a friend, she'd soon realize he was her biggest supporter and champion.

On that note... "Thinking of your dad in a boardroom, it's hard for me to imagine him pushing you into a marriage you don't want."

She turned to him, that warm smile lingering on her lips. Oh, man. He was in big trouble. When she aimed that look at him, he would gladly give her the world. Or be tempted to sacrifice himself in the effort.

"Please." She huffed. "You haven't been there in years, right?"

“Right,” he confirmed.

She swatted away his opinion with a flick of her hand. “Lately he talks of nothing but legacy and generational growth.” She rolled her eyes. “He doesn’t want to leave the bulk of his life’s work to my cousins.”

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“Shouldn’t you inherit everything?”

Her lips flatlined and he suspected she was holding back a torrent of Italian expletives. “Only when I go back and take over the management of company operations.”

“But you don’t want that.”

“No, I do not.” She nodded firmly. “I like it too much here. In Brookwell, I mean.” Her lips tilted up on one side. “And thanks to you, soon I’ll have even more reason to stay precisely where I enjoy my life. Once we’re married, tradition dictates I honor my husband’s wishes.”

Emotion rested heavy over his heart. “Well.” He cleared his throat. “More than anything, I wish for you to be happy.”

She squeezed close to him. “Thank you.”

He had the feeling she didn’t comprehend the full depth of his sincerity. Her happiness had become his number one goal. And that started with providing her with the utmost security and bolstering her confidence in him and herself.

### Chapter Fifteen

Later that afternoon, dressed for the sunset wedding ceremony, Trina and Rhett met Ilsa and Max downstairs, where a courtesy car waited to take them to the marina. After a quick round of hugs, Ilsa assured her the special details, including rings and

flowers, were already in the trunk of the sedan.

Trina had deliberately chosen for them to ride together. She hadn't wanted to get caught up in any bridal jitters or superstitions by taking separate cars or trying to avoid Rhett seeing her in the dress until the last possible moment.

This wedding was real in some important ways. And it was still a charade in many others. Legally, no one could argue the validity of the marriage—and that was her first priority.

"The photographer will meet us there," Ilsa explained from the front seat as Max drove. "It will be a short cruise and then we'll come back here for the party. Nothing too big, I promise. If either of you need anything tonight, just let me know."

Rhett's hand rested on the seat between them. "Thanks for pulling this together at the last minute. Thanks to both of you."

"Yes," Trina chimed in. "We appreciate everything you're doing for us." She laced her fingers through his, pleased with herself for making such quick strides on the affection scale. Sometimes she reached for him before she realized what was happening. It was a lovely experience the way he accepted her touches. He didn't fuss or resist or act as if she was coming on too strongly.

It helped tremendously that his first reaction to her in this dress was fresh in her mind. When she'd stepped out of the bedroom, ready to go, his jaw had dropped. For a moment, he'd been speechless—in a good way. The best way. She planned to pull out that memory whenever she needed a boost of confidence. There in that space halfway between the living room and the bedroom, she'd done a happy spin for him—letting the skirt twirl—and caught the flare of heat in his gaze.

She couldn't recall anyone looking at her the way he had in that moment. His blue

eyes had blazed with desire. “You look gorgeous,” he’d said, his voice rough around the edges.

Gorgeous.

Rhett Ellington had told her she was gorgeous on their wedding day.

Was there anything better?

She pulled the moment close and wrapped it around her heart. It would be a true highlight of this entire experience. But then she started to worry because she found herself completely smitten with him. It was rooted in his kindness, warmth, and steadiness.

He was always pulled together, but tonight was different, for so many reasons. Impeccably dressed, his crisp white shirt was open at the collar and topped with a vest in a blue that matched his eyes. His dark, nearly-black slacks and deck shoes completed the look. He might’ve stepped right out of a bridal magazine.

She couldn’t remember what she’d said to him, only that he’d smiled, and her heart started spinning happy pirouettes.

Everything about tonight felt surreal. To prevent a giddy meltdown, she was pretending they were just headed out to a fancy dinner with friends. It worked. Mostly. Right up to the point when the captain welcomed them aboard the sailboat.

Ilsa and Max carried a tote and the boxes of flowers, and as soon as the photographer arrived, they were underway.

Once Ilsa added a floral headband to Trina’s hair and a boutonniere to Rhett’s vest, the photographer started taking candid shots. Trina sat next to Ilsa on one side of the

catamaran as they cruised away from the harbor.

“Excited?” Ilsa asked.

“Yes,” Trina replied. She was thrilled to be marrying Rhett, even if it was destined to be a short-term arrangement.

“You both look fabulous.” Ilsa handed her a bottle of sparkling water. “And so happy.”

“Thank you,” she murmured. “We did more sightseeing today.”

He’d truly gifted her with a wonderful day, she realized. Through their conversations and reconnecting, she was delighted with how much they had in common beyond their work. The very normal relationship discovery warmed her from head to toe. If she’d been normal, if this situation had been normal, she would be eager for their next date.



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Ilsa glanced out at the horizon. “Your pictures are going to be amazing.”

“Thanks to you,” Trina said. “You nailed all of this from style to color. I owe you big time.” Although it couldn’t possibly be difficult to style Rhett in anything.

“It’s a pleasure.” Ilsa chuckled. “I’ve never seen Rhett grin quite so much,” she said. “I’m thrilled for both of you.”

“You’ve made this so easy. I appreciate that more than words can say.”

“Are you kidding? I live for this. The reception is going to be a blast, I promise. The two of you only need to enjoy yourselves, the moment, and the memories you’re making together. Day one of forever, right?”

Trina gulped the water and changed the subject. “How is Annie?”

Ilsa tapped an app on her phone screen. “There she is. Already napping.” She tilted the phone so Trina could see. The dog was curled up in a deep fluffy bed. “She makes me feel guilty whenever we leave her behind, but we have cameras now that prove she settles almost the minute we’re out of her sight.”

“Such a sweetheart.” Trina listened, though her gaze kept slipping to Rhett. The wind ruffled his hair, making her fingers itch to do the same thing. Maybe she should chalk up the unusual reaction to the equally bizarre situation. Her persistent urge to touch him flummoxed her. For so many years, she’d only allowed herself to have these tingly feelings for handsome celebrities who were well out of reach.

No one who might actually call her out for shying away from a physical connection.

With her parents sending “good boys from Italy” to meet Trina, Harper hadn’t been shy about pinning down Trina’s ideal man. Though she didn’t want to ruin her friend’s fun, the answer had been simple: men she would never meet in person.

Now Trina had to adjust the definition to one specific man: Rhett.

The four of them sipped sparkling water and chatted companionably until the captain and photographer agreed they were in precisely the right position.

With the sun sinking low and painting the sky with swathes of pink, gold, and indigo, Trina’s stomach filled with butterflies. Holding a bouquet of blue hydrangeas and white roses, she exchanged vows with Rhett in a ceremony that went by in a blink. When it was time for her to say “I do”, she almost giggled, recalling their earlier conversation at the Hemingway House.

To her surprise, the moment felt utterly perfect. Nothing awkward or insincere. The joy in her heart was bright and real. There was only happiness in his gaze as he held her hands and smiled back at her.

The ceremony didn’t just feel real, it was real. And a good thing too. This was most likely the only wedding she would have. Gratitude filled her up that he hadn’t allowed her to settle for a brief few minutes at the courthouse.

When they kissed for the first time as husband and wife, she was so glad they had practiced last night. She didn’t stiffen up. She didn’t get scared or lean away from him. She let his lips brush hers and she kissed him back as the tenderness flooded through her.

Eventually, she heard Ilsa and Max cheering. The photographer staged them for

several formal pictures at the railing, near the wheel, and in front of the incredible sunset. By design, their bodies were close together and by some magic that only Rhett possessed, she wasn't cringing inside. She was remarkably relaxed and content. Probably the happiest woman in the world. Her heart overflowed with hope and affection. Rhett had done more than step up to do her a favor, he'd truly given her an experience she could treasure.

Possibly an experience she could build on. Eventually.

The crew served prosecco and refreshments as the catamaran glided over the water and back to the marina. The photographer directed them together for a few more casual photos and Trina leaned close. "Thank you for going above and beyond for me."

He ignored the photographer's direction and touched his forehead to hers for just a moment. "Always. It's an honor and a pleasure, Trina."

She basked in those words, a little overwhelmed by the warm intensity gleaming in his eyes, until Ilsa surprised them with tiny wedding cake petit fours—a perfect bite for each of them.

"Open up," Rhett held the treat to her lips.

It was the most natural thing in the world to take the cake from his fingertips and feed him a bite in kind. She was married to Rhett Ellington. She kept glancing down at the wedding band, a perfect fit under her opal ring and the matching band on his hand.

She couldn't stop smiling.

Since her parents set all this nonsense in motion, Trina had dreaded marriage. Of all the feelings she anticipated on her wedding day, effervescent joy hadn't been one of

them. No, she'd been braced for crippling anxiety when the day was finally forced upon her.

But that was back when she'd been resigned to tying the knot with a groom chosen by her parents.

Max drove them back to the Cove and Trina practically floated into the reception party Ilsa had arranged. The ballroom was decorated to perfection with more hydrangeas and roses, soft lighting, a dance floor, open bar, buffets filled with savory and sweet goodies, and too many guests to count.

They kissed again in front of everyone when the DJ announced them, and then mingled, never wandering too far apart. If she didn't know better, she would've thought Rhett was truly in love each time she caught him watching her. She hoped she was radiating the same sort of affection toward him.

She decided she was doing well because everyone who spoke with her commented on Rhett's obvious happiness and how wonderful it was to see him in love. She wasn't so sure about love, but with every beat of her heart she felt a deeper bond.

It would've been easy to blame it all on gratitude, but she knew it was more. He'd saved her from an untenable situation—one he didn't fully comprehend. She really did owe him an explanation before they returned to Brookwell. The last thing she wanted was for Luca to interfere or use the past as some kind of claim on her.

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Even with all the celebrating, her mind occasionally edged toward the eventual break up that would disappoint all of these lovely people. Not today's problem. Thankfully, it seemed every time her mind drifted too far into the future, Rhett found her and brought her back to the present.

They danced. They had a cake cutting. All the typical wedding moments, with none of their family in sight. She couldn't speak for him, but for her it made it all easier.

She loved her parents dearly. They'd always wanted to see her happy, they simply disagreed about how Trina should reach that goal. And they were wildly demanding when it came to proper traditions. Recent talk about legacy didn't help matters. She wasn't interested in taking over one of the family properties or shifting to desk work as part of the hotel management side of the Bollani business interests.

She shouldn't be thinking about any of that right now. This was her wedding day and Rhett, with Ilsa's help, had gone out of his way to pack it full of good memories for her. The least she could do was stay present. Lighthearted and happy, she did exactly that until the festivities wound down.

They left the ballroom in a hail of bubbles and laughter. Outside, he whisked her around the corner, cutting through a garden toward a service elevator. "This way no one will sneak up on us," he explained.

Alone with him, surrounded by the lingering scent of fresh laundry, her nerves struck. A normal bride and groom would be together tonight. In one bed. Focused on each other, exploring the physical joys of their first night as husband and wife.

If he hadn't stepped up to help her, he would have that. Instead of... Her.

He ushered her out of the elevator and into the suite, locked the door and leaned back, his head tipped up, eyes closed. Her fingers tingled, eager to touch that strong column of his throat. She couldn't recall anyone else inspiring this daring, unfurling desire.

He looked so good, casual and relaxed. Confident in who he was. She wanted to take some of that into herself, use it to mute the countless doubts that plagued her. "You look incredible," she murmured. Incredibly tempting.

"Same goes." He pushed away from the door. "Our first married kiss felt picture-perfect to me. You?"

Oh, right. They'd practiced at her request. She nodded, words failing her as he walked closer. Did he expect...? Was he hoping for a typical wedding night?

Was she?

"I'm sure the pictures will be convincing," she managed. "And thanks for all the little moments at the party." She was confident now that no one had any idea this was a scheme they'd hatched a couple of days ago.

"You had a good time," he said.

It wasn't a question. "Didn't you?"

His smile lit up his face, his eyes dancing with amusement. "Yes." He seemed a bit dazed by the admission. "The big reception wouldn't have been my first choice, but it was the right one. Ilsa will be reminding me of this forever. And it was a blast."

"You think our friends and family will see the pictures?"

“I’m sure of it.”

Which meant Luca would likely hear about it too once her staff at the Inn started chattering. With any luck, pictures from tonight would be the catalyst that would propel him back to Italy ahead of schedule.

“Ready to call it a night?” He unbuttoned the vest as he walked toward the kitchen. “Or do you need a nightcap?”

She suddenly didn’t want the evening to end. Didn’t want to face the fact that they would sleep in separate beds. Not just tonight, but for the duration of their marriage. Trailing after him, she boosted herself up onto a counter stool. “Yes. If nightcap is code for a tall glass of water.”

He turned, bobbing his eyebrows. “It is, in fact.” He poured water for both of them.

“Gimme.” She wrapped her hands around the glass he’d filled with ice and water. “Being a happy bride is thirsty work.”

Across the counter, he faced her, gulping down the water and refilling his glass. She was certain that watching a man swallow shouldn’t be so sexy.

Then again, Rhett wasn’t just any man. He was the man who’d stepped in when she was frightened. He was her hero, saving her from the dreaded Bachelor Number Three.

Maybe it was the romance of the entire day combined with the marvelous high of dodging parental interference. Whatever the cause, she suddenly wanted this to be more real than fake. Even in private.

Did she dare ask? And if he agreed, would she be able to follow through?

That was the question that plagued her. The very issue that kept her locked down and set apart from normal relationships.

“You’re thinking mighty loudly, Mrs. Ellington.”

“Mrs.,” she echoed. She hadn’t thought of how it would sound. How she’d feel with a different name. It wasn’t horrible. She was proud of the family she came from, but this newness bubbled through her, much like those firstsips of prosecco as the sun set over the water. She was still her, but also someone new. A wife and partner. Someone newwithRhett.



Could she become someone brave too?

Married now, who could stop her? The notion was heady. Addictive. Nearly as tempting as obsessing—on the inside—over his every enticing movement.

“I am thinking.” She felt heat flooding her face. “Can’t stop thinking.”

His eyebrows knitted, casting shadows over his eyes. “About who’s waiting at the Inn?”

“No.” She stood up. She was an adult. A woman who knew her mind despite her fears. Rhett wasn’t forcing her hand tossing out ultimatums. He’d given her choices. She could do this. She would state her desires and hopes. She would have this important conversation with her husband.

“About us.” Too late, she realized she had him backed into a corner right here in the kitchen. “About tonight.”

“I’m listening.”

At least he wasn’t trying to get away. Yet.

“My track record with intimate relationships isn’t great.” What an understatement. “You’ve noticed I’m skittish and you’ve been wonderful about making me more comfortable.” Her heart was racing now and she had to pause to catch her breath. “Do you think, um, I know this will be a wild request.” She forced her eyes to meet his. He had called her gorgeous. Said he was attracted. Kissed her like she mattered. She

lifted her chin. He couldn't say yes or no if she didn't ask.

"Would you have sex with me tonight?" It came out in a rush. "Please. Just this one time can be enough."

Assuming she could see it through. With Rhett, staring into his eyes, she trusted both of them. She truly believed he would help her over any struggles. She believed in him more than she did in herself.

His eyebrows lifted and he stared at her. "Trina." He reached for her left hand, gently cradling it in his bigger palm. Already she felt treasured. Valued instead of merely convenient. "I think you've mistaken me for someone who isn't into you."

The low rumble of his voice stirred her senses. "So you'd be okay with, um, doing this tonight?"

He lifted her hand to his lips and the featherlight kiss seemed to seal a deep, abiding promise. "If once is all you want, I'm in. If every day for the rest of our lives is what you want..." His voice trailed off as he traced the curve of her jaw with his thumb and his hot gaze held her captive. "I'm in."

Her heart, racing moments ago, tripped and stuttered in her chest. He meant it. He wasn't giving her a line or saying what she wanted to hear to get his way. Breathless, it was all she could do to reply. "L-let's start with tonight."

His grip on her hand tightened for a heartbeat, the only sign of nerves she could find in him. "One condition," he said, a smile teasing the corner of his mouth.

She swallowed, braced for rejection. "Which is?"

He tipped up her chin, his blue eyes intent. "You'll tell me if anything I do troubles

you or makes you uneasy.”

She bobbed her chin in the affirmative, wishing he'd kiss her so she could stop thinking. “I promise. Right now, I'm one giant bundle of uneasy,” she admitted. “But I want this. You.”

Flustered, she lifted a shaky hand to run her fingertip over the soft petals of the boutonniere on his vest. “I don't know what to do next,” she whispered.

“Let me kiss you.”

It was a suggestion. Not a demand. Not even a question. “Yes,” slipped past her lips without a thought or worry.

His hand glided over the back of her neck, up into her hair. And a good thing too. Because the moment his lips touched hers, she melted. She clutched at his shoulders as he drew her in close to his body. Close enough to feel that she wasn't the only one affected.

Aroused.

That was the only word for it. Every nerve in her body reached for him, for the sensual promises arcing between them. His spicy masculine scent wound around her, underscored by the sweet flower on his vest and the hint of clean soap bubbles from their send off.

And still a small, shy part of her waited for the groping to start.

He pulled back. “Talk to me.”

But she couldn't ruin the present with the shadows of her past. “I'm good. You

are—this is amazing. Please, don't stop.”

His brow flexed. “We don't have to rush any of this.”

She did. She needed to rush headlong into her new self as Mrs. Rhett Ellington. Not because she was afraid. Or not just that. Because she longed to be his wife in every sense, even if the marriage wasn't destined for forever. For years, she'd believed positive, mutual intimacy was beyond her. To have this moment tonight, with Rhett—a handsome blend of integrity and raw sex appeal—was a miracle all on its own.

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“I don’t feel rushed.” Speaking it, the truth gave her a sweet buzz. “Please...” She couldn’t summon the right words. Running her palms over his chest, she felt his heart pounding. A jolt of feminine power rippled through her. She reached for the buttons of his vest, knowing he was the answer to so many questions she’d long buried.

Questions about herself and her ability to make a personal, intimate connection.

She pressed up on her toes and kissed him, boldly following the sensual intuition rioting through her.

All good. No fear. And with his arms wrapped around her, strong and steady, she was already celebrating the new self he would help her create.

### Chapter Sixteen

In the dark, Rhett stared at the ceiling for a time. He was a husband. That absolutely had not been the plan, yet here he was. Married and actually happy about it. Beside him, his wife slept soundly.

He was content and awestruck at the same time. This was so much more than he’d thought life would give him. More than he thought Trina would offer.

She’d shocked the hell out of him in the kitchen, asking to make their marriage real in every sense of the word. And though she’d been cautious at times, it turned out they were wildly compatible in bed too.

Who knew?

Well, he'd suspected. And he'd been prepared to wait a long time for her to become interested enough or bold enough to ask for more than hand-holding and sweet kisses.

Rolling over, he snuggled closer and tried to get some sleep. Tried to think about something other than the legal, physical, and emotional variations of a marriage. He'd meant what he'd said about putting their own definition on their relationship.

So why did he want to tell her he loved her?

Were all those murmurs about the "boss's whirlwind romance" during the reception getting to him? Was it simply bubbling up from a lifetime of watching his parents express their feelings for each other?

He cared about her. He respected her. He worshipped her body. But it had to be too soon to actually be in love. He must be caught up in the romantic story they were showing the world so neither of them would be pressured anymore.

In just a few hours they would return to Brookwell and face his family, her friends. There would be a lot of questions to answer. They should make time to tell her folks. Better to get ahead of it than letting them find out through social media or some other gossip channel.

He was dozing off to the soft sound of Trina's breathing when the classic phone on the nightstand rang out. He'd deliberately left their other phones out in the kitchen so no one would bother them.

He couldn't remember it ever ringing before. It was only active because this was actually a hotel room. Reaching over, he picked up before the noise woke Trina.

"Ellington."

“It’s Marino. From the security office.”

Rhett was on his feet and headed for the closet for clothes when the phone cord stopped him. Tony Marino was a Guardian Agency liaison to the Cove. The partnership offered a stronger presence and peace of mind for everyone in and around the property—guests included.

“I’m on my way down.”

“No need,” Tony said. “The research team emailed a report to you and when you didn’t respond to the email or a follow-up call, they called me. Apparently whatever it is is urgent enough to interrupt your wedding night. Sorry about that.”

“No worries. Thanks, Tony.”

“You’re welcome. Give Mrs. Ellington my apologies.”

“Will do.”

He replaced the handset and sat there a minute. Trina hadn’t moved, but he knew she was awake. “Tony sends his apologies.”

“Hm.” The mattress shifted and the sheets rustled as she moved closer. “Security office, right?”

“Your memory is astonishing.”

“Yours is just as good,” she deflected. “What’s the problem?”

Resigned, he turned on the lamp. If necessary, they could sleep in and delay the flight back. Possibly catch another nap on the plane. “Let’s go find out.”

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He was tempted to just go get his laptop and bring it into the bedroom. Not the first time he would've worked from his bed. But now it was their bed and he didn't want anything outside to come between them here.

He pulled on a pair of workout shorts while she slipped into a fluffy spa robe and followed him to the main room. Seated close on the couch, he opened his laptop and quickly found the email.

He paused before he opened the message. "I warned you the Guardian Agency security teams wouldn't let Gallo's antics slide."

"I remember. And?" she prompted.

"And during the staff meeting I asked them to dig a little deeper."

"Hm." She didn't sound pleased. Started to move away from him.

He rested a hand lightly on her thigh. "Not about your past," he said. "About his present."

She relaxed under his hand, frowning thoughtfully. "Go on."

"His comments and grandiose assumptions bothered me." Along with everything else about the guy. "Long before he poked around at the Ellington properties."

Her gaze fell to the rings on her left hand, the only jewelry she wore at the moment. It made him feel possessive and proud and countless other emotions he didn't want to



dwell in for too long.

After a moment, she nodded, coming to some decision. “You’ve kept them waiting long enough. Whatever it is, we’ll deal with it.”

“Do you have any idea how strong you are?” It was one of her most attractive features.

She rolled her eyes. “High praise before we have any details. Go on.”

He opened the email from the research team and they read through it together.

The extra manpower team he’d asked for was being supervised by Travis Upton, Max’s former partner. The report was comprehensive as they followed Gallo all around the Lowcountry yesterday from the moment he left his room at the Inn. He’d poked around Brookwell businesses on Central Avenue and walked around the marina. Apparently, bored with tourism, he’d gone into Charleston. He spent thirty minutes each at two different banks, had lunch with a real estate agent, and played a round of golf with a well-known business investor.

“That doesn’t make sense,” Trina said. “My mother says he does business with many people, but one main reason she wants him to marry me is to get me back home. What does he need with bankers and real estate in America?”

“I’m curious how he got on the investor’s calendar so quickly. That guy is constantly in demand.”

“Maybe he didn’t,” Trina said, lips pursed. “He showed up days earlier than planned. Is it possible he set up these appointments earlier?”

“It’s the most logical explanation.”

Her smile bloomed, then faded. “What’s all of this?” She pointed to the bullet points below the surveillance report.

Rhett skimmed the intel and understood the urgency. “Financial report.” None of it was good. “He’s bankrupt, or close enough.”

“No,” Trina lurched back and stared at him in denial. “That can’t be right. My parents would know. They wouldn’t shove me at a man with such poor prospects.”

“But they’d shove you at a man who hurt you?”

“I never told them,” she snapped. “They wouldn’t be so excited for me to marry Luca if they knew the truth. About either issue.” Her chin came up, daring him to contradict her.

He didn’t dare. In fact, he believed her. “Good to know. I really want to like my in-laws.”

She blinked. “Of course you do. You’re a good man. And they will like you too.”

Though she didn’t say it, the “eventually” came through loud and clear.

Rhett quickly shifted back to the pertinent issue before he gave up on the report in favor of showing her the wonders of sex on a couch.

“For the sake of argument, let’s assume the report is accurate. You know him better than I do. Better than the team currently tailing him,” he reminded her. “Would Gallo be aggressive about marrying you to solve his money problems?”

She sucked in a deep breath and released it slowly. “I haven’t spoken with him in years, so my data might be skewed.”

“Tell me anyway,” he urged.

With a twist of her lips she began, “He’s always had a precise vision for his life. Timelines and targets for career achievements and personal milestones. If something has unraveled—business or money—yes. He would hide the facts and go to any extreme to fix it. Even marry me.”

Rhett didn’t care for the way she tacked that last bit on as if she were a consolation prize. “Good thing that option is off the table, Mrs. Ellington.” He was rewarded with a big smile. “Let me share our thoughts with the research team and we can get back to sleep.”

She stayed, reading over his shoulder as he replied to the email. She didn’t even protest when he requested they continue to monitor his movements and any changes in the banking.

He almost added a request for a protection detail on Trina, but decided it would likely upset her. Besides, he had no intention of letting her out of his sight until Gallo returned to Italy.

### Chapter Seventeen

With the sunstreaming through the sheer curtains at the bedroom window, Trina stretched like a content cat. She was alone in the bed, but it still smelled like Rhett. Hearing the shower running, she indulged herself, burying her nose in his pillow.

She could do this every morning now, and what a marvel that was, she thought with a

smile.

She was surprised she'd been able to get back to sleep last night, all things considered. She was married. She'd successfully navigated an intimate experience with her husband. And she'd been able to help him respond to a security concern without being plagued by worry after.

It would be easy to give Rhett all the credit, but he'd never accept it.

Truly, it would be a disservice to herself to make such a claim. She hadn't gotten here by being shy. No, she'd defied her parents and overcome a ton of emotional baggage. She hoped she could make it last in the days, weeks, and months ahead.

She took another few minutes, basking in the complimentshe'd showered on her, especially the one about her strength. It wasn't something she dwelled on, but maybe she should.

"Hey. Good morning, sunshine."

She gathered the sheet close and sat up to find Rhett standing there, fresh from the shower, wearing nothing more than a towel wrapped around his lean waist. Her mouth went dry and her heart tripped all over itself, banging against her ribs. "Hi," she squeaked.

She wasn't prepared for moments like this, in the bright light of day.

He walked closer and now she recognized the heat blazing in his eyes. "Can I kiss you?"

"Of course." She met him halfway and forgot everything else. The man positively leveled her with his tenderness.

When he broke the kiss, it was with a groan that sounded suspiciously like regret. “Room service will be delivered in half an hour. Is that enough time?”

“Of course.” She sounded like a broken record. “We’re taking the charter flight back to Brookwell?”

He winked. “Of course.”

She snorted and shooed him out of her way. But he caught her lightly in a hug and nuzzled her neck before she dashed off to clean up for the day. She was a wife and enjoying soaking up her husband’s affection.

This was not the woman she thought she could ever be. And she was happier than ever about it.

When she joined Rhett at the kitchen, he had everything laid out. “Courtesy of Ilsa,” he explained. “Also, the flight crew is ready whenever we are.”

Trina wrinkled her nose. “Is it terrible that I don’t want to go back yet?”

“We could stay.” He set an espresso in front of her. “I sounded too eager, didn’t I?”

“Just a bit.” She laughed it off. “If you need to stay, I can go back alone.”

“No.” He closed his eyes. “No, as in, that’s not the issue.” He smiled and made a point of filling a coffee cup. He considered making it about “selling their story” but he was over that. “I didn’t think I would miss having a real honeymoon,” he confessed. “In the meantime, I want to be with you. If that’s okay.”

“Oh.” She felt heat climbing into her face. “That’s more than okay,” she managed. “We’ll have to start making real honeymoon plans. I can get more time away from

the Inn, with ample notice.”

“Great,” he said with a smile.

Over a hearty breakfast they talked about possible honeymoon spots. It was hard to find a location in Europe neither of them had visited, so they took a different approach, discussing warm or cold climate. Outdoor activities versus fine dining and shows. And whether they should make time to go see her parents in Italy.

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As they packed, Rhett's phone chimed again and again with social media alerts. News of their wedding was spreading fast. She swallowed the urge to ask about staying a few more days in Key West. They'd barely scratched the surface on all the lovely things to do here. But Luca was making life difficult for her staff and she wouldn't let them suffer any longer than necessary. Once she returned, she could explain her marriage and send him away.

She shivered, thinking again about what the research team had turned up. Luca had been so pushy from the moment he saw her. Would she have been able to fend him off without Rhett's help?

"You okay?" Rhett asked, zipping up his suitcase.

"Fine. Sometimes I get chills when I'm tired. It'll pass." She should tell him the whole story, but after last night she was more reluctant than ever. What if the facts changed the way he looked at her? What if instead of seeing her as strong, he discovered she was weak at heart?

"I should talk to Dad," he said when his phone buzzed with yet another social media alert.

Oh, she wasn't looking forward to facing any of the Ellingtons. "Do you think he'll be super angry with me?"

"You? Not a chance," Rhett assured her. "And I'm sure he'll leave any scolding to the aunts. But he's likely our best ally for smoothing over any issues with your parents."

“That’s not a bad idea.” She nibbled on her lip. “They’ll probably handle it poorly at first. Because of me, not you,” she said. “But they respect your family and they’ll come around.”

He walked over and opened his arms. She stepped into the hug. “But I’m not Italian and I have no intention of taking you back there to run a company you’re not interested in.”

She chuckled. “Which is more than half the reason I married you.”

He laughed and kissed the top of her head. “Let’s go call the parents.”

In his office, he adjusted the camera so they would both be in frame, then he sent a text message. A few minutes later, the video call link came through. “Ready?”

“No,” she confessed on a bubble of panicked laughter. “Don’t you want to talk to them privately?”

“I’d rather we present a united front from the very start.”

“All right.” She smiled and braced herself for whatever might come.

Rhett joined the call and a moment later, Forrest Ellington’s face filled the screen. Handsome and fit, he was simply a more mature version of Rhett. She’d always liked him, and as a kid she had thought of him as an uncle.

“Hey, Dad!”

“Good morning.” He grinned. “Your sister tells me you have news.”

Rhett chuckled, lifting his hand to show the wedding band. “Yup. We’re married. I



take it Harper told you because social media has been blowing up?”

Forrest cocked his head. “Harper came to us so your mom wouldn’t see the news online first.” He turned and called to his wife, Darlene. “Come meet our daughter-in-law.”

Mrs. Ellington hurried into view, taking a seat beside her husband.

“Hey, Mom.”

“Hey yourself. Hello Trina. You look lovely. Welcome to the family.”

The greeting was warmer than she’d expected. “Thank you,” Trina said. Sitting close to Rhett helped settle her nerves when she wanted to fidget. “I know it must be a surprise,” she began.

“It hit us out of the blue too,” Rhett continued. “But it’s exactly what we both want.” He graced her with a dazzling smile. “We’re happy.”

“And now you’re pulling us in after the fact to soften the blow for her parents?” Forrest asked.

“You have been friends for years,” Rhett pointed out shamelessly. “A little support would be nice.”

“Trina, you can’t possibly be afraid of your father,” Darlene said. “Your mother on the other hand...” Darlene didn’t finish the comment, but her smile was bright and friendly.

“She will be hurt,” Trina admitted. Under the table, Rhett pressed his knee to hers, offering comfort.

“I’m sure they’ll eventually understand we only did what was best for the two of us,”  
he said.

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“Seeing you both so happy goes a long way,” Forrest agreed. “Why don’t we start planning a party for the family to celebrate with you? When will you be back in South Carolina?”

“Later today, actually,” Rhett replied. “During the staff meeting yesterday we all sorted out a schedule for me to work remotely a couple weeks at a time. Trina needs to be more hands on at the Inn.”

“And you’re only a few hours away if there’s an issue,” Darlene noted.

“Exactly,” Rhett confirmed.

“Would you look at that,” Darlene said. “We raised him right. He knows how to find a work-life balance.”

His dad grunted and rolled his eyes. “I think you and I did pretty good.”

“We think you did awesome,” Rhett said.

His father shook his head. “Quit sucking up. I want the whole story.”

“We both do,” his mom confirmed.

“It’s pretty cut and dried,” Rhett said.

When he glanced at her, she gave him a subtle nod to spin the tale. She’d listen and echo it as needed.

“It was kind of a domino effect,” he began. “We’ve been reconnecting since I’ve been spending more time in the area. She and Harper are close.” His parents were hanging on his every word. “The more we talked, the more we realized how much we had in common.”

“Well, of course you do,” Darlene murmured.

“It’s not an oodles of romance story, Mom. Sorry.”

She flicked that aside. “It doesn’t need to be. As long as it’s what you both want.”

“It is,” Trina interjected. “My parents have been pushing me to marry. It’s been awkward at best,” she admitted. “We sort of stumbled into the idea, but it felt right. Rhett is an amazing man. Getting to know him as an adult has been wonderful. I’m thrilled to be his wife.”

“I’m equally thrilled to be her husband,” he said.

“Well, your father and I will host a reception for you,” Darlene said. “Will your parents come? It’s been a while since we’ve seen them.”

“I’m sure they would love to attend,” Trina replied. “Once they get over the shock that we eloped.”

“I’m not going to tell him for you,” Forrest warned. “But when he calls me in a temper demanding to know what the hell you were thinking to take this step without even meeting them first, I’ve got your back.”

“You couldn’t make it sound a bit less ominous?” Rhett asked.

Forrest laughed. “Maybe you should think about a honeymoon in Italy. Spend some

time with her parents. I'm sure that would go a long way to smoothing things over."

"The whole reason we eloped was because neither one of us has time for a honeymoon right now," Rhett said.

"Oh?" Darlene was clearly skeptical. "That's the whole reason."

"I'm not pregnant," Trina blurted out. "If that was a concern."

"Well hooray for traditional and orderly timing," Forrest joked.

Beside her, Rhett seemed to have lost the storyline. "Would you like to see the ring he chose?" Trina held her hand up, waiting for the camera's focus to adjust.

"My word, that's lovely," Darlene gushed. "Good choice. It's beautiful on you, Trina."

"I love it." She swallowed. "Almost as much as I love your son."

Darlene blinked rapidly and Trina hoped those were happy tears.

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“I’ll call when we land in Charleston,” Rhett promised. “Maybe we can get togetherfor dinner.”

“Why don’t you come to the Inn tomorrow?” Trina offered. “I’ll reserve a table for the four of us.”

“Sounds great,” Forrest said.

“And you’ll have to come for brunch,” Darlene added. “The family will want to welcome you and hear the whole story.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Rhett said.

Brunch would be a gauntlet. “I can’t wait,” Trina gave them her brightest smile. “We’ll bring wedding gifts for everyone.”

“That’s not how it works,” Forrest reminded her.

She shook her head. “Favors, I mean.” She laughed at herself. “The kind of thing we would have had at a formal wedding.”

“That’s very thoughtful,” Darlene replied. “Let me know if you need any help. We look forward to seeing you both tomorrow.”

She waited until the camera went blank and Rhett exited entirely from the app before she relaxed. “I was sweating buckets. Were you?”

“For a minute. But it went well. They’re happy for us.” He helped her to her feet. “When do you want to tell your folks?”

“Never?” Her laughter cracked. “I’m taking a page from your book,” she decided. “I’ll call Nonna as soon as we get back and she can help me with any of Mom’s drama.”

On the drive to the airport, she hoped to return to Key West soon. This entire trip had been too brief, even if it was by design. If anything about this situation remained false, it certainly wasn’t the contentment she felt here.

## Chapter Eighteen

They were at cruising altitude before Rhett realized he felt as if he was really going home. Not just back to his hometown, but home. How quickly Key West turned into work and Trina became home. It was the strangest and most wonderful thing to feel so deeply for her in a different way.

He was considering the best way to win over her parents. He had eloped with their precious daughter—their only daughter—who they’d hoped to marry to a good Italian boy. He might not have the right solution just yet, but he wouldn’t let her deal with it alone.

Whatever happened, they were a united front from this point forward.

He peeked at her now over the edge of his laptop. She’d been quiet since their call with his mom and dad. Introspective. Maybe she was tired too.

As a few more romantic ideas popped into his head, he fired off a couple emails to make sure she had a warm welcome. They didn’t need another party, but he wanted fresh flowers for the suite and maybe a casual get together with his sister and a few

friends at the Pelican would set the right tone.

“What kind of wedding favors are you thinking of?” he asked. If she meant to give them out at brunch on Sunday, they needed something easy and fast. “And how can I help?”

She smiled and sat up a bit straighter in her seat. “Maria and I are on it,” she said, holding up her work phone.

“Is Gallo giving her more trouble today?”

“Not right now,” she reported. “He left right after breakfast. Anything interesting from the team following him?”

“Pretty much the same as yesterday. No golf so far,” he added.

He decided to change the subject. “You know Harper is going to hassle me non-stop about being in love with you forever.”

She stared at him. “That makes zero sense. What are you talking about?”

“She’ll twist this around that all the times I complained about you were my attempts to deny an attraction. Marrying you will convince her she’s right.” He closed the laptop. “She’ll be insufferable. You’ll have to protect me.”

“Hm.”

“Your mind is a thousand miles away.”

“I suppose.” She shifted in her seat. “It’s all so different.” She pointed to him and back to herself. “For the good. I am happy we did this.”



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He waited, but she didn't elaborate. "I'll listen if you have more to say."

"I appreciate that." Her smile didn't last. "I'm distracted."

"Because of Gallo," he guessed.

"Yes." She rubbed her cheeks. "Does your face hurt from all the smiling yesterday?"

He chuckled and let her change the subject. "Maybe." He paused, tapping his fingers on the arm of his seat. "You know, I'm happy to schedule a charter flight for Gallo. To get him out of your hair faster." He didn't consider it a blow to the budget. It would be a smart investment in his marriage.

"Maybe." She leaned forward. "Before we get back, I want you to know the truth." She reached for a water and drank deeply. "From me, not him."

"Trina. Don't you dare let him force anything. That bastard could tell me the sky was blue and I wouldn't believe him."

"You're remarkable," she murmured, her voice barely audible over the rumbling of the plane. "I care about you. About our marriage."

He more than cared for her, but kept it to himself.

"Can you give me your word that you won't, um..."

"Fly off the handle? Punch him in the face?" he supplied.

She smiled. “For starters.”

“No,” he stated honestly. “I won’t fly off the handle, but I can’t promise not to punch him. He had a chance to do the decent thing and leave on that first night. Instead, he stayed around, harassed my family, and is seemingly up to no good.”

“He doesn’t realize why I don’t want to be around him. Why I’ve avoided him all this time.”

“Sweetheart, if you want to tell me, tell me. But please don’t try and sell me on Luca Gallo. I’ll never be a fan of a man who hurt you.”

“That’s fair. Thank you.”

Watching her come to a decision, he braced himself.

She turned the bottle of water around in her hands. “I’d just been accepted into the program in France,” she began. “It was a dream come true. My parents were slightly less enthused.”

“Only-child issues?”

“Precisely. They wanted me to be happy. Preferably within their reach for the rest of my life.” Her mouth tugged to the side. “We went out to dinner to celebrate and bumped into Luca at the restaurant. He was working, picking up extra shifts. His work ethic always impressed my father. Still does.” With a sigh, she continued. “He and I had been out on a couple of group dates. I wasn’t looking to get serious with anyone because I really wanted to travel before settling into what my parents wanted for my career and my life.

“Luca slipped me a note as we left, asking me out. Just the two of us,” she continued.

“Flattered, I was excited to go. For a while, we had a great time. Coffee, a couple of movies, a late picnic after the restaurant closed. He was always a gentleman.”

“Until he wasn’t?” he asked when she paused. It was all he could do to stay still. He was glad he hadn’t promised not to punch the bastard.

“It was my first time.”

He didn’t have to ask which first time. His back teeth clenched but he didn’t interrupt.

“I got overwhelmed,” she said. “And I didn’t speak up. At least not enough.” Her eyes were dry, her expression somber. “When I got scared, he didn’t hear me and I sort of...sort of let him have his way. When it was over he took me home and I kissed him good night.” She swallowed. “A week later, I went to France.” Her gaze locked with his. “I apologize.”

“For what?” he snarled.

She gave a start, but she didn’t look at him with fear in her eyes. “For France,” she clarified. “I was raw and edgy. Unfortunately, I took it out on you. I couldn’t say anything back then. I couldn’t face it myself. So I gave my all to the program, pushing hard to make sure I wouldn’t have to go home. I was so afraid of failing that I abused our friendship.”

“We weren’t exactly friends at that point. We hadn’t seen each other in years.”

She gave him a hard look. “You know what I mean. I knew I had a problem about a year later when I punched a guy who tried to kiss me at the end of a date.”

Rhett’s laughter caught him by surprise. Fortunately, Trina was soon laughing with

him.

“It’s not funny,” she sputtered.

“Agree to disagree,” he said. He wanted to hold her so badly, but he stayed put. “Is that when you started therapy?”

“Yes. It’s not been the easy road, but well worth it.” She pressed her lips together. “I wasn’t sure I’d be able to kiss you at our wedding. And then, last night... Well, that was a miracle for me.”

“Me too.” He couldn’t take it anymore, so he moved to the seat next to hers, delighted when she let him wrap an arm around her shoulders. “You are amazing, Trina. Strong and brave and incredible. Never forget it.”

She cleared her throat. “I don’t feel bad when you touch me. I don’t get lost or overwhelmed with you.”

“And we’ll keep it that way.”

“Yes, please.” She tucked her hair behind her ears. “You’re not disgusted?”

“Not with you.” Only with Luca.

“I didn’t complain or file a report.”

“You survived,” he murmured. “That’s what matters to me.”

She seemed to take him at his word. “I’m a whole lot better than I was when it first

happened. But I want you to be happy too.”

Where was she going with this?

“You made a point of insisting that I tell you what I like,” she said, breathless. “Will you help me become better for you?”

“Are you asking me for sex lessons?”

Her deep brown gaze turned shy. “Yes.”

Every fiber of his being went tight with desire. “So last night wasn’t a one-time deal?” Her receptiveness this morning had been encouraging, but he wouldn’t take anything for granted.

“I hope not.” She looked pained. “What do you think?”

Too much. She was everything. His voice failed him. He kissed her slowly, giving her room to back away if necessary, but she eagerly moved closer and what should have been easy and light caught fire.

It was the best answer he could offer her. Her sweet, hot response was even better.

Somehow, they managed to keep their clothes on for the duration of the flight, but he was sure they’d left the crew with plenty to talk about.

## Chapter Nineteen

Walking into the lobby of the Inn, Trina did a double take. She spun around, aiming an accusing look at her husband. “You’ve been busy.”

He held up his hands in surrender. “Blame Maria.”

The surprise gave way to joy as her staff applauded them and started blowing bubbles. Wedding bell garlands and swag dripped from every possible surface. The normal floral arrangements had been replaced by blue hydrangeas and white roses, to match her bridal bouquet. Above the reception desk, a big sign welcomed Mr. and Mrs. Ellington.

“You guys!” Trina swiped away a happy tear as they made the rounds.

Maria gave her a big hug. “We’re so happy for you. For both of you.” She gathered Rhett into the hug as well. “We can take your luggage upstairs,” she offered. “Lila brought over a cake and everyone’s dying to have a bite.”

The pop-up party was nothing short of amazing. She introduced Rhett to everyone as they cut and served cake. She was so happy with the warm welcome, she didn’t even notice Luca until he walked right up to her, the next person in line for a slice of cake.

He smiled, but there was a hard glint in his eyes that made her uneasy. She didn’t need to worry, Rhett was right by her side.

“What is this?”

“We eloped,” Rhett said with way too much glee. “Won’t you congratulate us?”

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“I’d like to speak with Trina alone.”

“No,” they said in unison.

“I’m sure you’d like to get home,” Rhett said. “We’re happy to arrange for a car to the airport.”

“Trina,” Luca pleaded. “A word?”

Trina plopped a slice of cake on his plate. “Thank you for joining our party, Mr. Gallo. Please enjoy yourself.”

He moved along, but from the corner of her eye, she saw him dump the cake in a potted plant. The man was a menace. She managed to keep the string of curses inside her head. And out of pure joy for the man she did marry, she kissed Rhett soundly on the lips.

He grinned in complete understanding.

When the impromptu reception line died down about an hour later, Rhett shared a text message with her: Gallo at the airport

“How long ago?” she asked.

“Thirty minutes.”

“Good riddance.” Now that things were calmer, she took his hand and guided him



toward the front desk, moving straight back into the office and out of sight. “We need to get you a key so you can unpack and settle in.”

“I’m good.”

“I know you want to check in with your team.”

He waved his phone. “This’ll do.” He braced his arms on the desk while she pulled a lockbox out of the bottom drawer. “Afraid I’ll start making efficiency suggestions?”

“You wouldn’t dare,” she said, playing along. She opened the lockbox, found the key in a small brown envelope, and handed it over.

“Thank you.”

“If you don’t mind, I would like to check on a few things before the shift changes.”

“I get it.” He closed the office door and pulled her up and into his arms. “I’m greedy,” he said against her lips.

She wasn’t sure how long they kissed, only that she didn’t want to stop. “Rhett.” Her hands came to a rest over his heart.

“I know.” He wound a curl of her hair around his fingertips. “Gallo’s gone, so I don’t feel the need to hover quite so much. Bummer too. I was hoping to get a good punch in.”

She appreciated the sentiment. “Thank you for being willing to shadow me in a good way. And thanks for being willing to punch the smug right off his face.”

“Anytime.” His phone chimed. “Knox and the guys are at the Pelican. I can come

pick you up when you're ready?"

She grinned at him. "Harper already told me what time to meet her outside."

He seemed relieved that she wouldn't be traveling alone, even though Luca had left. She pushed up on her toes and gave him one last kiss. "I'll see you soon."

But time got away from her. She messaged Harper and told her to go on without her. She needed a few minutes to herself to change clothes and freshen up.

A notecard was tucked into the door. Not Rhett's handwriting, but the message was from him: When you get to the Pelican, come meet me on the beach first. I have one more surprise.

He must've called from the pub and had someone at the desk bring it up. The man just wouldn't quit with the romantic gestures. Still using her work phone, she sent him a text message and hurried out to meet her husband where their adventure had begun.

Logically, she knew the island wasn't actually more colorful than when she'd left, but her newfound happiness painted everything in a brighter light. Golden evening sunlight coated the sky, trees, and the beach as she walked along the road toward the Pelican Pub. Nearby, the waves rolled up over the sand in a soothing rhythm and seagulls called to one another.

On cue, pelicans glided by, heading home to roost.

As she neared the beach access across the street from the pub, she recognized a few cars in the lot and knew a wonderful evening with friends awaited them. Yes, Harper was bound to give them a little grief for eloping, but it would be worth it.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:12 am*

Crossing the dunes, she looked around, surprised Rhett wasn't right there waiting with his sexy smile and irresistible embrace.

"Rhett?" She looked up and down the beach as she moved closer to the incoming tide line. She didn't see him anywhere. Something felt wrong in the pit of her stomach and she told herself she was being silly. A wife for barely a day and already worried over her husband's whereabouts.

Rhett wasn't like that. He was honorable. He gave his word and kept it. She really needed to tell him she was in love with him. Not because he'd helped, but because her heart was his. And would be forever.

She walked a bit past the point where he'd found her so upset over Luca and saw something in the sand at the water's edge. Not something. A person.

"Oh, no!" She rushed forward, willing it to be anyone but Rhett, despite the familiar shirt and khaki shorts. "Rhett!"

He was face down in the incoming tide. "Oh, no." She called his name, repeating it like a chant as she tried to rouse him.

What had happened between sending the message and now? Had he passed out? He was too young for a heart attack. Too healthy for any major physical concern. She fell to her knees beside him. Running her hands along his neck and shoulders down his back, calling his name the whole time.

She couldn't see any wounds, but face down in the surf like this, the incoming

foaming edge of the water coasted right into his mouth. She had to move him. Hoping there wasn't an injury she couldn't see, she pushed and shoved until he was on his back.

"Rhett, honey. Wake up. Rhett!" She patted his face, gently at first then with a little more force. She checked for a pulse. Still there, weak but steady. His breathing was shallow, but he was alive.

She moved around, determined to drag him back from the water. With his clothes soaked through and his muscular build, she fell on her backside. Getting up, she tried again, fell again. Torn between running for help and leaving him there, staying won out. She wouldn't leave him to drown. She'd call for help and stay right here.

She fished her phone out of her pocket and with trembling hands she pushed the emergency icon on the work phone.

Before anyone answered, strong arms banded around her body, coiling around her waist and breasts like a snake, drawing so tightly she couldn't breathe. A strong hand latched onto her throat, squeezing until she saw stars.

Luca. No one else would do this.

"Hello, my darling."

Those horrible arms hauled her back from Rhett's lifeless form. He was still too close to the water. If he didn't wake up, he could drown. She kicked and twisted to no avail.

"Say goodbye to him, Trina. You're my bride now."

The tension around her waist eased and she wriggled, trying to scream. Something

damp covered her mouth and nose. Fabric that smelled wrong. She tried to scream but could only gurgle. Every effort to escape made her weaker.

Luca had drugged her.

She heard him muttering about proper weddings and the life he deserved. And then she blacked out.

Rhett sputtered as water hit the side of his face, rolling into his ear and across his cheek, then back again. Saltwater sprayed across his lips. He turned away and spit the water out of his mouth into the sand.

He tried to sit up only to have the world spin out from under him. His entire body was one big ache, starting with his head. His mouth was dry and his vision blurry. He rubbed at his eyes and looked around. How the hell did he get out here on the beach? The last thing he remembered was a text from Trina. She'd asked him to meet her for a sunset walk on the beach before they met with friends.

“Trina!”

Twilight was spreading across the sky. The first stars were already sparkling in the sky. “What the hell?”

Everything inside him went cold. He reached for his phone but it was gone. He either dropped it in the water or...

Gallo.

Yes, he was supposedly at the airport, but this kind of setup had that bastard's fingerprints all over it.

Rhett had a shadowy memory of being shoved down into the wet sand. A heavy hand on his head and a knee on his back.

Gallo did this. Lured him out here, attacked him, and then what? Did it matter? The only reason was Trina.

He had to find help. Make sure she was all right. He shoved himself to his feet. Staggered as the world pitched and sloped away. Not cool. Hauling in deep breaths, he struggled to form a plan as he worked his way back to the pub.

First, confirm Trina was safe. Then he could figure out how Gallo managed this. Rhett couldn't let Gallo get within shouting distance of his wife. As soon as he found Trina, they would file a restraining order. Blacklist Gallo's passport. Whatever it took to keep her safe.

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He knew love when she was in his arms. He recognized it in her eyes even though she hadn't said the words yet. Hell, neither had he.

That would change the minute they were reunited.

He felt a spurt of energy when he spotted the boardwalk with the Pelican Pub sign. Ignoring his wobbly legs, he moved as fast as possible over the dry, wallowing sand. At the boardwalk, he used the handrails to propel him onward. Almost to the road.

"Ellington?"

His head swiveled toward the sound of his name. There in the parking lot, he saw Travis Upton, Max's former partner. Two other men were with him. One he recognized from training times at the gym, but he didn't know the man's name. The other was David Frasier, the Brookwell Police lieutenant's oldest son. They'd gotten into some trouble back in the day.

"You look rough," Travis said. "What's going on?"

"Where's Trina?"

"Harper assumed you were together," David said. "We were thinking y'all might've stood us up, so we gave her and Knox the table for date night."

He shook his head and stopped quickly. The motion made his vision blur. "Gallo," he said. "Set us up. Dumped me in the tide. He must've taken Trina."

“What the hell?” Travis looked at the man Rhett didn’t know.

“He was at the airport. I watched him go through security.”

“I put an airtag in his luggage before he left the Inn,” David said. He pulled out his phone. “The bag’s in Charlotte.”

Travis swore and turned to David, barking out orders.

The stranger stuck out his hand. “Logan Harris. Never had the pleasure to meet you, but I’ve stayed at your hotel downtown a few times.”

When Travis finished with David, Logan cut him off. “I know what to do.” Car keys in his hand, he jogged off.

“What will he do?”

“Get things rolling at the airport.” Travis slipped his arm under Rhett’s shoulders. “If Gallo got out of the main terminal before boarding, Logan will find him. Come on. David and Knox will be queuing up the security footage.”

“I was attacked on the beach,” Rhett said.

“We’ve gotta start somewhere. Reed has good cameras around here.” He circled his finger in the air to encompass the whole building. “If Gallo came by, we’ll spot him.”

“As long as we hurry. I’m not sure how much time we have.”

Travis took Rhett around the back so they wouldn’t draw any more attention. “Do you remember anything?”



“Not a lot,” Rhett said. “Thought the text was from Trina. Pretty sure he clocked me from behind and left me to drown. Clears his path to Trina.”

Travis swore.

“That sums it up,” Rhett agreed.

As soon as they stepped inside, Rhett saw his sister near the office. “What’s going on,” she demanded, rushing forward. “You look like hell.”

“Feel worse,” he admitted. “Got jumped on the beach, that’s all. The guys are helping me sort it out.”

She shook her head. “What else? Don’t lie.”

Rhett drew her into the tiny office, already crowded over-capacity with Travis, Knox, David, and the Pelican’s owner, Reed. “Anything yet?” Travis asked.

Knox pulled Harper to his side. “Gallo attacked Rhett down on the beach,” he murmured. “And we’re pretty sure he took Trina.”

Naturally, his sister didn’t panic. She swore. “What can I do?”

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“Nothing yet,” Rhett growled. He shot Knox a hard look. There was no way he wanted his sister to get involved in this.

Reed was already queuing up the footage and they all leaned in, studying the images on the monitor. Before long, they saw Gallo walking down the street, taking the boardwalk over the dunes.

“How the hell did he get back here from the airport?” David muttered.

“We’ll sort out the how later,” Knox said. “Right now, we need some idea of where he took Trina.”

Panic bubbled in Rhett’s chest. Gallo had his golden ticket and he wouldn’t give her up without a fight. He drank the water David handed him, willing it to erase the effects of the attack. Because Rhett had no intention of giving up Trina.

Knox held up his phone. “Jenna, you’re on speaker,” he said to the Guardian Agency researcher.

“Hey, all. What do you need?”

“Luca Gallo. What’s the latest intel?”

“I’ve got a rental car in his name, picked up today.” The men glared at that news. “Give me a second.” They waited in silence. All Rhett could hear was his pulse pounding in his ears. “Here we go. GPS is showing him at a hotel near the airport.” Another pause. “I don’t see his name on any flights leaving tonight.”

“What about Trina Bollani?”

There was a sharp inhale followed by rapid-fire keystrokes. “Nothing under her name either.”

“The charter.” Rhett’s voice cracked and he cleared his throat. “Look for any private charters under her family’s hotel management company.”

After a moment, Jenna replied, “Negative. But I’m looking at a charter scheduled to depart in 90 minutes under the Ellington corporate account.”

Rhett swore. “He’s stealing my wife and using my own account to do it. I’m going to beat him to a pulp.”

“Looks like we’re headed to the airport,” Travis said. “Jenna, can you loop in Logan, please?”

“Sure thing.”

Knox ended the call and gripped Rhett’s shoulder. “Let’s go rescue your bride.”

## Chapter Twenty

Trina came around slowly. It felt as if her mouth had been stuffed with cotton. When she tried to move, she discovered she’d been jammed into a small space. Zip ties pinched her wrists and ankles. One of her shoes was missing.

Mechanical smells of oil, grease, and gas clouded the air. Though she breathed carefully, she choked and coughed.

She heard footsteps approaching right before a light came on somewhere above and

behind her.

“Luca.” She practically spat his name.

“You’re awake, my darling. I was starting to worry.” He crouched on the other side of a cargo net. “We’ll be leaving shortly.” He looked around her. “It could get bumpy back here, but no worries, my darling. Once we’re in the air, we can have a civilized conversation.”

“Where is Rhett?” Luca’s smile made her sick. “Where is my husband?”

He lunged at her, but couldn’t strike her through the cargo net. “You’ll never say those words about anyone but me again. Your first husband has died in a tragic accident.”

She started to swear, to curse, heedless of the tears streaming down her face. She called up every foul-mouthed insult she could manage in a tantrum of epic proportions.

Luca simply backed away and turned out the light.

As her tears ebbed, a cold fury took over. As soon as she had the chance, she would tear Luca apart and find her way back to Rhett.

He wasn’t dead. Couldn’t be.

Because she loved him and she was sure that life wouldn’t be so cruel as to never allow her to tell him.

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Rhett couldn't fault the team's expertise as Travis laid out the plan. With five of them, they could cover both paths out of the hangar. Jenna had already spoken with the charter service and while the pilots continued working through the pre-flight checklist, the plane wasn't going anywhere.

They had confirmation that Gallo was inside, but so far, no one had spotted Trina.

Luca could have her on board, or hidden in the rental car.

Thanks to Jenna's intel and with the cooperation of the charter service, Logan had managed to get the uniform necessary to pose as part of the maintenance team.

"He's going in," Travis said through the radio. "Everyone sit tight."

Rhett struggled with the direction, but Knox kept a heavy hand on his shoulder. They were sitting in a golf cart, watching from another hangar managed by the charter company.

"Let him work," Knox murmured.

"She's in there."

"We need more intel. We don't know if Gallo has weapons or?—"

Rhett wanted to shrug off his friend's attempt to help. "He has Trina."

"Take a breath," Knox said. "Watch him work."

Rhett tried, but he felt too far away, had too many what-ifs racing through his head. As Logan moved into the hangar, Gallo came around a corner, wheeling a suitcase. Rhett's heart rate slowed. Everything playing out in front of him slowed.

"She's in the plane," he said, mostly to himself.

"We'll know in a minute."

But Rhett already knew. It was in the way Gallo glanced toward the charter, the way he kept himself between Logan and the steps. "I know now."

He put the golf cart in motion and rolled closer to where Gallo was feeding Logan lies. Knox cursed him out, but he kept right on rolling until he was parked in front of the hangar. He walked toward the nearest trash can as if he was just doing his job.

Gallo's arrogance showed itself. "No, no! You can't leave that there!"

Rhett spun around and charged the bastard. Gallo hesitated, so certain he'd killed Rhett back on the beach. "No! You cannot be here!"

"Wrong again." Rhett grabbed him by his shirt. "Where is she?"

Gallo struggled, breaking Rhett's hold. He scrambled backward, only to run into Logan.

"Stand down," Logan ordered. "Relax, man. We just have a few questions."

Gallo held up his hands. "A misunderstanding."

"You kidnapped my wife!" Rhett roared.

He threw a flurry of punches, light blows, just toying with the Italian. Gallo tried to counter, but Rhett had all the experience to back up his desperation.

Logan wisely stepped out of the fray.

“Where is she?”

“Who?”

The smirk was the last straw. Rhett rammed a fist into Gallo’s gut, doubling him over. He let him wheeze just long enough to stand up and then Rhett finally punched him square in the face, hearing the crunch of bone under his knuckles. Gallo dropped to the ground like a felled tree.

“Is he dead?” Knox asked.

“Alive,” Rhett shouted, leaping over the bastard and up the stairs into the plane.

“Trina!”

“Here! In the back!”

He swore in relief at the sound of her voice, strong and furious. She didn’t sound drugged or seriously injured as he’d feared. He raced toward the sounds from the back of the plane, finding her bound, hand and foot behind the cargo net. Another wave of fury swelled up and he nearly went back to punch the Italian bastard again.

“You’re alive!” she cried, trying to get closer to him. Tears rolled. “Thank God. I thought...”

“You saved me.” Bits and pieces were coming back. She’d been there, trying to rouse him. “I’m alive because of you.” He paused to kiss her and then went to work on the bindings.

“Where is he?” Her eyes were still full of fear—for both of them.

“Down and out. Knox and the others have him.” His breath backed up in his lungs. “I’ll kill him.” He repeated it over and over as struggled to release her. The bastard didn’t deserve to take another breath after stalking and terrorizing his wife.

“No.” Trina countered every threat. “I need you. You. Here with me.”

Finally, she was free. “Always. I’m here.” He stroked her wrists, gently restoring the blood flow and checking for injuries. “Did he hurt you?”

“Not really.”



He cupped her face, kissing away her tears. “You’ll never see him again.”

She shivered. “Get me out of here.”

He helped her to her feet, supporting her as they inched toward the front of the plane. He checked to make sure Gallo was gone and he could keep his word. Seeing the others had him boxed into a corner, hands cuffed with zip ties, Rhett brought her to the door.

“Here we go,” he said, guiding her down the stairs. He went out first, ready to catch her if she stumbled. “Take your time.”

Trina couldn’t keep her hands to herself, holding Rhett’s shoulder down the steps, gripping his arm as he led her into the hangar, and away from the others gathered near the wide opening. Everything felt too big, too uncertain. Except him. He was her rock.

She clung to him, her face buried in his shirt. “Don’t let go.”

“Not a chance.” He guided her toward a couch, and sitting down, he pulled her into his arms.

She was so grateful to be held close. His heart beat under her cheek, strong and steady. He didn’t move from her, didn’t nudge her aside, letting several other men deal with Luca. She recognized Knox and Travis, but not the other two. No doubt, they were also with the Guardian Agency.

“I’m glad you have good friends.”

“The best.” His breath shuddered in and out. “They picked up your trail right away.”

“Good.” She’d find a way to thank them later. “Part of the extra security you arranged?”

“You knew?”

She nodded, her cheek rubbing against his shirt. Gradually, the fear gripping her chest eased and the reality of their survival sank in. Sirens swirled around them and she couldn’t give it much of her attention. She was too busy breathing him in, loving him.

She’d been so scared and come far too close to losing him. Never again. Never. She had to be brave enough to tell him. Somehow it seemed harder than telling him about her past. “Rhett?”

His hand stroked up and down her spine, smoothing away the last of her fears. “Yes?”

“I want a marriage.” She eased back, just far enough to meet his gaze. “This marriage. I love you. Not for saving me. Well, yes for saving me, of course. But so much more.”

He kissed her softly. “I love you, too.” His gaze roamed over her face. “Every heartbeat is for you. It started on our wedding day,” he admitted. “You’re my heart, Trina. My life. No divorce for us. I want forever with you.”

“One condition.” She felt her smile wobble, but she persevered. She caught his face between her hands. “Never call me ‘my darling’.”

“That’s a promise I can keep.”

Chapter Twenty-One

Rhett had no trouble with the promise he'd made to Trina before they left the hangar, but as the official legalities dragged a bit, he struggled to accept Gallo's fate. He had to accept he would always want another knock-out punch.

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Over the following week, he and Trina gave their statements through various meetings with prosecutors. They learned Gallo would be tried for the crimes he committed in Brookwell, including stalking, harassment, attempted murder, kidnapping, and several more technical issues regarding fraud and his crimes at the airport.

Through it all, they made an effort to find their rhythm as newlyweds in what he hoped was a temporary small-town spotlight. Trina had met up with her trivia night crew and they'd logged another win while Rhett and Knox played darts with the guys.

Determined to set everything right, they deliberately walked the beach at sunset each day, hand in hand, kissing whenever the mood struck. No ugly memories would be allowed to fester and cast shadows over the life they'd chosen.

There was her first family brunch as his wife, where she was welcomed with open arms by his parents, the aunts, Uncle Bruce, and several other close family and friends.

Brunch had gone far better than his introduction to her parents over a video call that was brittle and rocky. His father's attempt to pave the way hadn't done much. Marco and Talia were deeply hurt that Rhett had not made a traditional request for Trina's hand.

Trina refused to allow them to stay upset with him. Clutching his hand in hers, she shared a sanitized version of Luca's initial crimes against her when she'd been a teenager. As the bigger picture emerged, as she revealed the pain that had festered for

too long, her mother had wept. Her father too.

The subsequent apologies might've gone on forever, if Trina hadn't deftly steered them toward happier plans. Like an invitation to Brookwell and the opportunity to help plan a wedding reception for both families to celebrate.

"You're a miracle worker," he said when the video call ended.

"We're a miracle team," she countered. "I could never have told them the whole story without you right here with me." She dropped her head on his shoulder, giving a weary laugh. "You make me stronger."

He kissed the top of her head. "You think so?"

"I know so." Her eyes sparkled with happiness when she looked up at him. "And we're gonna need every ounce of our combined forces when they arrive."

He laughed with her, grateful beyond measure that somehow he'd found the perfect partner to navigate the happiest life possible.

## Epilogue

Three months later

Rhett had to admit, a week of getting acquainted with his in-laws had culminated in an incredible party. Although he and Trina had refused to have a second ceremony—their first had been perfect—they were happy to have an official reception for their families. As wedding receptions went, he figured this one was over-the-top regardless of Harper and Trina denying the claim.

He couldn't argue. The excessive celebration was basically a necessity after such an

unexpected elopement.

They had decided to host it at the Ellington resort, mostly to give Trina a break from her work environment. Her parents were staying at the Inn and getting all the behind-the-scenes history and tours they could ask for. They were blatantly monopolizing her, in the most supportive and adorable ways.

Clearly, they'd missed the closeness they'd had with her as a child.

He tried to hide his amusement over how much they wanted to see Trina at her workplace versus how little they wanted to see him at all.

He couldn't really blame them. She was an amazing manager.

It was just bonus points that his dad wanted to show off the newly remodeled and refurbished spaces at the resort.

Rhett didn't mind stepping back, giving others the limelight. After all, he had everything he needed—a lifetime to love Trina.

His dad and his new father-in-law were spending a great deal of time together. Likely concocting some grand scheme for a new location or some kind of combined effort.

For Rhett, being married was collaboration enough.

Ilsa, Max, and Annie had come up for the week to help Rhett keep Trina from overdoing it. He wanted her to feel like the special and adored bride that she was.

Although he wouldn't confront his sister yet, he was well aware she was using every opportunity to mine Ilsa for ideas on building wedding packages for the Charleston properties.

Glancing around the room, his gaze paused on each of the faces he recognized from the Guardian Agency. Of course, he'd invited the people that had helped him rescue Trina. And he'd requested extra security for this week specifically. He doubted anyone from his family realized how much personal protection expertise was in the room, but he wasn't taking any chances. Not with any of them.

He smiled, watching his sister work the room on her way to join him. She gave him a quick squeeze and a kiss on the cheek. "I'm so happy for you."

"Me too." He nudged her lightly with his elbow. "I finally got my wish," Rhett said as they watched Trina dance with her father.

Harper shot him an incredulous look. "You aren't going to stand here and tell me you wished for Trina your whole life."

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“No.” He arched an eyebrow. “You know I’m no romantic.” He ignored her laughter. Trina had probably told her a different story. Didn’t matter. “That’s you and Knox. I meant the Inn. It’s finally a part of the Ellington family portfolio.” Harper shoved him lightly but he didn’t budge. “What are you, ten? You should act like an adult, sis.”

She ignored his baiting. “The Inn is not ours.”

“You shouldn’t argue with me at my own wedding reception.”

“I’ll argue with you wherever I want,” she replied with a sugary smile. “Especially when you’re being delusional.”

Maybe he was delusional. If so, good for him. He was well-traveled, had seen some incomparable natural and man-made sights. And he’d rather be right here, completely consumed with the woman he loved, than anywhere else in the world.

“You can’t deny the logic.” Sometimes it was fun to be obstinate. “That’s Mrs. Ellington out there on the dance floor and she’s the manager of an historic inn.”

“Fine.” Harper hugged him, hard. “I am so happy for you.”

He slung an arm over her shoulder. “Thanks. I’m happier than I ever expected to be. And happy for you too. He caught his mother-in-law frowning at him. “Think she’ll ever forgive me?”

“Maybe. Eventually.” Harper’s gaze turned mischievous. “It’ll probably require a grandchild.”



He figured she was right. And for a moment, visions of children danced in his head. He didn't expect Mrs. Bollani to hold back on her demands to start the next generation.

"We're going to need more than just the suite at the Inn," he murmured, thinking aloud.

"And what about Key West? Will you keep splitting your time?"

"Hm," he used one of Trina's tactics. He had a few things in mind, and all of them would require family approval. "I'm not talking business tonight." The music changed to casual beach tunes and he grabbed her hand, leading his sister to the dance floor.

Giving a startled squeak, she followed him. For the next several minutes, it was just joyful silliness as they danced. His gaze tracked Trina, watching as she murmured something in her father's ear.

He wondered if it would always be like this.

"Yes, it will," Harper warned him.

"What are you talking about?"

"You're wondering if you're always going to be so focused on her."

"Did I say it out loud?"

"You didn't have to." She looked up at him with warmth and love shining in her eyes. Eyes so like his own. "I know you. You love her. She's your everything. And it's beautiful."

“You’re sappy.”

“Right back at ya.”

Before he could protest, Trina’s father tapped his shoulder. “Mind if I cut in?”

Harper laughed, moving off to dance with Mr. Bollani while Trina stepped into Rhett’s embrace. “I missed you,” she said.

“Same. Always.” He brushed a kiss over her cheek. “Do we need to worry that your dad’s still going to take me out and feed me to the sharks?”

“I think I’ve talked him out of that. Besides, Mom is making all the grandbaby noises.” She grinned, tapping her fingers over his heart. “And that requires you.”

“Harper warned me,” he said.

“You do want children?” Trina’s eyes rounded. “We didn’t?—”

He cut her off with a twirl. “We knew what we needed to know,” he said when she faced him again. “Don’t go second guessing us now.”

“Never.” Her smile was beautiful. Her eyes were shining with pure happiness.

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“I was just thinking that when we’re ready, we should find a house here on Brookwell.” It was a testing query. For so long, she hadn’t felt secure enough to live away from the properties she managed. But with Gallo no longer a threat and happily married to him, a man she’d chosen, her confidence to live more fully grew day by day.

“Oh. What a good idea. I would love to raise our family here.” Her teeth nipped into her lip. “You really don’t mind commuting to Key West?”

“Not as long as you don’t mind me traveling so frequently?”

Another smile. “We’re making it work.”

No one here could possibly understand what a miracle it was that she was dancing with him. To have her completely at ease with his touch, even in public. He was overwhelmed with gratitude that he was the only person privileged with those secrets.

“Rhett, I need a breather,” she said. “Let’s go outside for a minute.”

“Of course.” The crowd didn’t bother him, but he wouldn’t mind a little extra space between him and her parents. Wasn’t much point in worrying, thankfully, since her parents had no plans to relocate from Italy.

Trina took his hand as they wandered out toward the dunes, the breeze off the ocean stirring her hair. “So about those kids we didn’t discuss.”

He tripped. “Are you... Are you making an announcement?”

“Well, I’d rather not make our big announcement today. My mother has had her way far too much this week.” She squeezed his hand and leaned into his arm. “I don’t want to tell them until they’re back in Italy. But I thought you should know I won’t be drinking prosecco for a while.”

He picked her up and spun her in a circle and when he set her back on her feet he kissed her tenderly. “We’ll be parents.” One more miracle to add to the growing pile.

With the ocean pulsing behind them, he couldn’t help comparing this night on the beach to the night he’d found her so upset. “I love you,” he said.

“I love you too.” She rested her cheek on his chest, snuggling in. “I never thought I could get over myself or find anyone to trust enough to become a mother.” Her arms came around his waist. “Thank you for being my hero.”

For a moment all the emotions and words tangled up in his chest. Overcome, he could only whisper, “I love you,” over and over.

“You aren’t upset?”

“No! Why would I be?”

“It’s all so fast.” She took a deep breath and tilted her head up to the stars twinkling overhead. “Everything between us has come in a rush.”

“Who cares about timing? Neither one of us wants to waste any more time.”

“True.”

“You’ve changed my entire life. Adjusted my course, permanently. You make every day so wonderful,” he said. “Being parents is only going to give us more of the good stuff.”

“Parents?”

They turned as one to see her mother standing there.

“Mama—” Trina began, only to be interrupted by a tidal wave of Italian. The only phrases Rhett could pick out were those involving love.

No matter how Trina tried to quiet her mother, the woman only grew more animated. Shouting for her husband, tears tracking down her cheeks. At least this time she was joyful instead of furious.

Rhett soon found himself in the midst of a crushing family hug. He’d thought the aunts were demonstrative, but they were practically antisocial compared to Marco and Talia Bollani.

Of course, the commotion drew a crowd and despite Trina’s hope to keep it quiet, news of her pregnancy raced through the party.

There were toasts and more dancing. More hugs and well-wishes. Every moment, quiet or loud, was a gift to be cherished.

They faced it together with laughter and happy resignation in the face of the loving chaos their families created. Together, they were stronger. And he knew that strength would grow with them. The same way he knew they’d joyfully and boldly face all the years to come.

Extend your stay on Brookwell Island with **IN THE SPOTLIGHT** a short-story peek into Nina’s life before Boone turned it upside down:

On a blustery winter evening, the Pelican Pub is packed to capacity. Nina Billings is eager to hear which bands are invited to the annual summer music festival. But her happy evening is turned upside down when a special honor turns into a bar fight.