

Bonus Content



Handfasting

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INTRODUCTION

Three months ago I told Rosanna to save the date. Looks like fate might have scuppered that idea....

BENEDICT

I've come to dread early morning calls. Especially on Rosie's phone. And not just because they disturb adult cuddle time. This is the third time it's happened.

The first time was before we were even a thing. It wasn't the best way to meet prospective in-laws, but it all worked out fine in the end.

Last time, it was a bit of a false alarm, and the drama was over in less than twenty-four hours.

This time, I have a feeling things are not going to work out quite so well.

Rosie is silent on the drive to the hospital, wringing her hands in her lap. I pull them to my mouth and kiss her knuckles. Her fingers release each other and cling to mine. There's no need for words. There's nothing to say. We both know Andrea's time is running out.



“Why don't you take your mum for a walk down to that café on the corner? The one with the good coffee.” I suggest, adding in a whisper, “You could both do with some air. And I think your dad could do with the break.”

Rosanna bustles an ever-fussing Flavia out the door and I'm left alone with Andrea and the hiss of the oxygen machine

that, for the time being, is keeping him breathing. His skin is grey, but his eyes are still bright with intelligence. He knows I orchestrated this time alone together, and in the circumstances, I don't have time to beat around the bush.

I drag a chair closer to the bed and clasp my hands together on the mattress. I almost smile because it looks like I'm praying. And in a way I am, although I don't have any doubt about the answer I'll receive.

"Andrea, we both know it's not good this time." He nods. "I want you to know I will always take care of Rosanna and Flavia."

Tears spring to his eyes.

"I wanted Rosie to have the wedding of her dreams. Especially after the last time."

That gets a weak snort of amusement from him. The drama we had with Rosanna's ex is over, but it will never be forgotten.

"But I also know she wants you to be there. And that's more important. So, I'm asking for your blessing to marry your daughter."

One of Andrea's now-thin hands rises from the bed and clasps mine. His is shaky, the veins showing blue under the papery skin. A stark contrast to mine. A reminder to grab each day, because we'll all be here, one way or another, someday.

"I've done the research, and we need to give thirty days' notice for a legal marriage. I don't think that's going to work, is it?"

Tears are tracking his face as he shakes his head.

"I know it's not Italian tradition, but I thought we could have a handfasting ceremony? And then if and when Rosanna and Flavia want one, I promise we'll throw the biggest, fattest Italian wedding ever."

Andrea releases my hand and pulls the oxygen mask away from his face with a gasp.

"*Si. Va bene.*" He stops and takes a few laboured breaths. "*Dio ti benedica.*" The mask snaps gently back against his face and I adjust it, making sure it's sitting comfortably.

"Grazie, Andrea." My voice is as watery as my eyes. But I have to get it together. I have work to do.

Lulu, Greer, and I had a secret meeting a couple of weeks ago when it looked like Andrea was going downhill. So we have a plan. All we need to do is enact it.

I check the hallway to make sure Rosie and her mum aren't loitering outside and call Lulu.

"Operation Handfast is a go." I say, without bothering with hello.

Lulu laughs.

"You guys got way too into the whole Ocean's Eleven thing when you were setting Marco up. Maybe it's time to let it go?" It surprised me how much I enjoyed that covert op, despite the danger. I secretly hope we have the opportunity for more in the future. Although without the element of an evil ex.

"Never. At least not until this operation is complete. Are you okay to get started?"

"Of course. Nick was making noises about heading back to Scotland until he realised how sick Andrea is. We're here for anything you need."

"Thanks, Lu. So. You're dress and flowers. Nick is music. Greer is catering, cake and invites. And I'll handle the celebrant and hospital."

"Aye, aye Captain." Lulu chirps and I can picture her flipping me a cheeky salute. "And the date?"

"Friday week. The doctors are confident Andrea will still be well enough then. Do you think that gives you enough time?"

"I'll make sure of it." Lulu's tone makes it clear anyone who gets in her way will be mown down. "The dress is almost done. The florist is on standby to order the flowers. Nick's been practicing like a demon. Let me know if there's anything else you need."

"Can't think of anything, but will do. Just let me know if you think she's suspicious."

I sign off and call my sister.

“Consider it done,” she says. “Oh, and the handfasting cord we ordered arrived yesterday. It’s so pretty, Bee. This is going to be the prettiest, saddest wedding ever.”

I hear the lift chime and the voice of my mother-in-law-to-be talking ten to the dozen in Italian.

“Gotta go. Talk soon.”

“Who was that?” Rosie asks, settling on the chair next to me, resting her head on my shoulder and taking my hand.

“Oh, just Greer. She wanted an update on Andrea.”

In typical Carter style my family have absorbed Rosanna’s parents with love and enthusiasm. Everyone’s been anxious about his condition, so Rosie won’t be surprised by the call.

“That’s sweet. I should give her a call. Do lunch sometime soon.” But her voice is distracted, distant. Her eyes scan her father’s face for the smallest sign of improvement. There’s little room left in her thoughts for anything but worry about her parents right now.

“Will you and Flavia be okay here for a while? I have a few things to take care of.” Rosie nods. “I’ll be back in a couple of hours to take you home.” I hate to leave her, but it’s for a good cause.

The two hours I’m away from Andrea’s hospital room are packed solid with organising, including a flying visit to my brother Will to update my will. A handfasting doesn’t mean much legally, and I need to make sure Rosie is protected. And Flavia is taken care of. Although I trust my family to do the right thing, it’s much easier for everyone if it’s all laid out and legally binding.

By the time I’m walking back into the hospital everything is in place. All I have to do is wait till next Friday. I just hope the doctors are right and Andrea makes it that far.

ROSANNA

I'm not sure I can face another day at the hospital. It's been nearly two weeks now, and it's exhausting. Mum fusses, dad wheezes, and I watch the life drain out of him. Although, for the past week or so he has been more stable. Not stable enough to go home, but at least not declining. And the old twinkle is back in his eye.

It's a good thing I work for myself these days, so I've been able to fit my work in around hospital visits. But I really need a day off from everything.

"What's that pout for?" Ben asks, coming out of the bedroom in jeans and a T-shirt.

"I don't know if I can face another day at the hospital. I wanted to have lunch with Lulu, or one of the girls. But nobody is free." I know I shouldn't, but I feel a little hurt. "Would you like to have lunch somewhere? Maybe a picnic on the beach?" Ben loves a picnic. He says it reminds him of our first date. Although we differ on the semantics of whether that day was a date.

He sighs, pulls me in for a hug, and kisses my forehead.

"That sounds wonderful. And I would if I could, my Rosie. But I have back-to-back meetings I can't get out of." He looks pained and apologetic, but resolute.

That's weird. Ben never hesitates to drop everything when I need him. Something is going on. He's been acting very twitchy—not in a bad way, but in an excited way—for the past

week or so, now that I take the time to think about it. And there have been a lot of very one-sided phone calls. As though he didn't want to say too much. If I didn't trust Ben all the way to my bones, I could almost suspect he was up to no good. But I know he's not. It's far more likely he's got a big deal in the works. I'm ashamed I haven't had the presence of mind to ask about it.

"Is everything alright? I know things haven't been easy the past couple of weeks, but you know I'm always here for you. No matter what else is going on." I lay my head against Ben's chest and absorb his heat. His breathing. His familiar heartbeat.

"Everything's fine." But his tone suggests I'm onto something. And because I know him so well, I know he'll tell me when he's ready.

"How about you get ready and I'll drop you at the hospital? I'll call when my meetings are done and maybe we can grab a drink and an early dinner?" He's a terrible liar. He's up to something. And I'll get to the bottom of it.

Ben drops me at the hospital without even coming in to say hello to my dad. Just as well. Dad is in the shower when I arrive, and he takes a good long time. He's looking better than I've seen him in weeks when he's wheeled out of the bathroom. All thoughts of Ben's strange behaviour evaporate.

"Have you had a haircut?" He's even wearing the lovely pair of navy silk pyjamas Benedict gave him last time he was in hospital. I'm shocked. He's not been well enough for that kind of thing lately. My heart soars.

"*Si. Si. Voglio avere un bell'aspetto,*" he gasps.

The nurse helps him up into the freshly made bed and an orderly comes in.

"Ready for your trip today, Andrea?" Dad's been here long enough all the staff know him by name. It doesn't hurt that Mum plies them with Italian treats on a daily basis.

"Trip? What trip? And have you seen my mother today?"

“Not yet, Rosanna. But your father wanted to visit the hospital chapel.” He flicks the bed breaks with his foot, checks the oxygen tanks and drips are secure, and starts wheeling.

Dad lifts his hand and waves me on, so I follow, my heart pounding. They say people often rally before the end. Please don’t let that be what this is.

The chapel is in a separate building from the main hospital, and Dad closes his eyes and lifts his face to the sun as he’s wheeled outside. A tear trickles down his temple. It’s a beautiful day and I’m so glad he gets to enjoy it, even if it’s only for a minute or two.

The doors of the chapel are closed but I can hear the strains of a piano drifting out. As we approach, they open, and I’m stopped in my tracks.

The palest pink peonies fill the alter table and sit in massive bunches at the end of each pew. Nick is at the piano. I can’t place the song, but it’s bluesy and beautiful.

The pews are lined with the people I love most. And standing at the end of the aisle is Benedict. Spectacular in a charcoal grey suit and my favourite blue tie.

A hand lands on my arm and I turn to see Lulu, dressed in the kind of gown I’ve always talked about designing for her when she’s my bridesmaid.

“Come with me.” Her smile is as blinding as it was on her wedding day.

I’m hustled into a small anteroom, where my mother, Stella and Greer are waiting. Along with the most beautiful dress I’ve ever seen. I couldn’t have designed it better myself.

“I know you always wanted to make your own dress. But do you think this will do?” Lulu asks, wiping at the tears I hadn’t even registered were falling down my cheeks.

I can’t speak. All I can do is shake my head, then nod. It won’t just do. It’s perfect. All the more so for the fact that Ben and Lulu arranged it. Proving yet again how much they listen. How well they know me.

In minutes I'm stripped and redressed. Lulu and Greer touch up my hair and makeup. My weeping mother kisses my cheeks. Stella hands me a bouquet of the same pink peonies decorating the chapel.

It's lovely. They're lovely. But all I really want is to get out there, to walk down the aisle to Benedict. Because he did this. All of this. For me. And I couldn't love him more if he was dipped in chocolate and rolled in sprinkles.

I'm shepherded back to the start of the aisle where my father waits on his hospital bed, a look of such love and happiness on his face that I start to cry all over again.

"*Ti amo, mia bellissimo tesoro,*" he rasps, clasping my hand in his.

"*Ti amo anch'io, papa,*" I reply.

Benedict is beaming when we reach him.

"*Grazie per avermi affidato tua figlia, Andrea.*" Benedict bends and kisses my father on both cheeks. I love the respect he pays my father by speaking to him in Italian. I love the way he ... just everything.

"*Sei un brav'uomo. Sono veramente fiero.*" Dad whispers.

And then it's just Ben and me. He leans in and brushes my lips with his.

"You did all this for me. For my father." It's a statement, not a question. Everything in this room is exactly as I would have organised it myself. Because Ben knows my heart.

"This is a handfasting, not a legal wedding. That needs too much notice, and I didn't want to wait. But in my heart, in my soul, this is me, marrying you. In front of your father and everyone we love."

"I love you," I whisper. I want to hear all the things he did for today. But there'll be time for that later.

"I love you too," he responds. The celebrant clears her throat.

The service is short but beautiful. Our joined hands are bound in an intricately knotted silk rope, decorated with dozens of silver charms and ribbons.

“In the joining of hands and the fashion of a knot, so are your lives now bound, one to another.”

The celebrant finishes and a cheer goes up as my in-all-but-law husband sweeps me in for a kiss. A kiss of passion and tenderness. Of love and delight. Of promise and hope.

ITALIAN TRANSLATIONS

Si. Va bene – yes, that's good

Dio ti benedica – God bless you

Grazie, Andrea – thank you, Andrea

Ti amo, mia bellissimo tesoro – I love you, my beautiful darling

Ti amo anch'io, papa – I love you too, Dad

Grazie per avermi affidato tua figlia, Andrea – Thank you for entrusting me with your daughter, Andrea

Sei un brav'uomo. Sono veramente fiero – You are a good man. I'm very proud.

FROM THE AUTHOR

I hope you enjoyed Ben and Rosie's wedding. If you'd like to see more of all the Carters, grab a copy of *The Nature of Falling in Love*, Will & Freyja's story here:

[The Nature of Falling in Love](#)

Thank you for reading!

Love Carrie x