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Vintage *SUPER*
ROMANCE

**No Groom
Like Him**
JEANIE LONDON

Jeanie London

No Groom Like Him

«HarperCollins»

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For a wedding planner with many events under her belt, Lily Angelica has never made her own trip down the aisle. Maybe because she compares all men to the perfect groom of her childhood fantasies—Max Downey. Too bad Max seems to think she's a miracle worker. He's convinced she can create a high-profile wedding in a few weeks—when she's on vacation, no less. Flattering, but so not going to happen...until he volunteers to help. All these hours working together make Lily admire the adult version of Max—his charm, his skills as a parent, his good looks. And the way he watches her... It's enough to make her believe she chose the right groom after all!

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Too much temptation

The way he felt right now. Alive. Aware. Of Lily. She made his arms ache to wrap around her, to pull her to him and feel every curvy inch of her pressed up against him.

She would fit perfectly against him, he knew, could feel it by the way they stood so close, their bodies almost swaying together.

She felt it, too.

Max couldn't do a damn thing except brace himself in that moment. Her voice filtered through him. He could inhale her subtle scent. Feel the graze of her hands on his skin. Sense the warmth of her body radiating between them. Imagine the way her body would melt into his.

Max knew. He could feel it in his gut where it counted, and he had to force himself to take a step back by sheer effort of will, force himself not to do exactly what he ached to do—pull her into his arms.

Because that would change everything between them.

Dear Reader,

After I wrote *Her Husband's Partner*, (Harlequin Superromance #1635) I suspected the folks in Pleasant Valley wouldn't stop living simply because I typed the end. They didn't. After all, who wouldn't want to live in such a wonderful place?

Lily Angelica, for one.

She had bigger plans for her life than her tiny hometown had to offer. But while she has been off chasing her dreams, she's lost something along the way. And that something is an important part of being happy.

Max could have told Lily her priorities were mixed up. He learned the hard way not to take life for granted and is making the most of every moment with his young daughter. But it turns out Max's journey back from grief has skewed his priorities a bit, too, so when this unlikely pair get together to plan a wedding, they find that, sometimes, the journey to someplace better brings them right back where they started.

Ordinary women. Extraordinary romance.

That's Harlequin Superromance! I hope you enjoy Lily and Max's love story. Let me know at www.janielondon.com.

Peace and blessings,

Jeanie London

No Groom Like Him **Jeanie London**



www.millsandboon.co.uk

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jeanie London writes romance because she believes in happily-ever-afters. Not the “love conquers all” kind, but the “we love each other so we can conquer anything” kind. It’s precisely why she loves Harlequin Superromance—stories about real women tackling life to find love. The kind of love she understands because she’s a real woman tackling life in sunny Florida with her own romance-hero husband, their two beautiful and talented daughters, a loving and slightly crazy extended family and a menagerie of sweet strays.

For the real Max.

You’re the stuff heroes are made of. Definitely!

And special thanks to Beth Fairweather, who always makes coming up with brilliant ideas so much fun ;-)

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CHAPTER ONE

All About Angel blog
Wedding Angel or Antibrude?

After a string of matrimonial messes, wedding watchers around the globe are wondering if the Wedding Angel—founder and CEO of a widely celebrated destination-wedding agency that shall remain nameless—has reached the end of her luck.

Consider how her engagement ended when the paparazzi caught her fiancé—an international bridal-show producer, also nameless—in flagrante delicto with a Brazilian runway model.

Now consider this weekend's fiasco of A-list actress Emmelina Belle's Polynesian nuptials. Celebrity and wedding bloggers alike have been reporting that this much-maligned diva was seeking public redemption with her wedding to Drew Hatcher, the leading man she hooked up with last year on the set.

Stealing Axis's Sexiest Man of 2010 from his television-actress wife devastated Emmelina's career, but maybe she should have reconsidered her choice of event planner. Or maybe the Wedding Angel should have washed her hands of this messy client after her own run-in with infidelity. While it's true the event was already in the planning stages when the Wedding Angel's engagement went bust, a woman touted as the Martha Stewart of matrimony should have recognized Emmelina's bid for favorable press. (What some folks won't do for attention!)

The ceremony took place during the magical moments before sunset. The media swarmed the island in helicopters, in Jeeps and on foot, scouring every corner for celebrity sightings, given carte blanche by Emmelina to publicize to the ends of the earth—or the farthest reaches of satellite coverage.

While no one could expect the Wedding Angel to control the weather...Mara'amu shouldn't have been a surprise.

This easterly trade wind is known to gust through the islands in winter, so one would expect contingencies to be in place for an outdoor wedding. But when Mara'amu swept across the beach during the fire dancers' tribal performance, the wind sent flames toward the highly flammable bamboo tents. The ensuing conflagration sent panicked guests fleeing in every direction. Emmelina wound up treading water. (Score one for karma! Drew's ex-wife is probably still laughing.)

As firefighters and local emergency personnel contained the flames, Emmelina emerged from the surf, steaming from both ears while the paparazzi documented everything—including the groom's reaction. He took one look at his ranting almost-wife (check out the photos at CeleBrats for the best shots—you can see when he makes up his mind to escape) and seized his chance for freedom, leaving Emmelina dripping wet at the fiery altar.

The paparazzi caught Drew at the airport an hour later, threatening an airline clerk to find him a seat on the first plane off the island...and said clerk politely suggesting Drew swim to the mainland.

So, thanks to the fiancé fiasco and Emmelina Belle, bridal bombs dominate the tabloids and internet, leaving wedding watchers all over the globe wondering: Wedding Angel or Antibrude? Cast your vote!

All About Angel blog: the latest buzz for brides!
“ARE YOU THE Wedding Angel or the Antibrude?”

That one question stood out over all the voices rushing Lily Angelica as she disembarked the private jet. She hadn't expected to find the press awaiting her on the tarmac, and even if she had, she definitely hadn't expected that question.

Coming to a halt, she set down her purse and laptop case, buying herself time for a deep breath. She would use the exit stairs as a makeshift podium since she was obviously conducting a press

conference. Exactly what she hadn't wanted. Not with her nerves shot and the dark circles under her eyes.

Reflex had her fixing a smile on her face. She straightened and scanned the crowd.

"Lily, any comment on Emmelina's wedding?"

"Will you confirm the rumor Worldwide Weddings Unlimited contracted the former president's daughter?"

"Are you in town to hide from what's being written on the All About Angel blog?"

Mention of the All About Angel blog had Lily searching their faces to see who was rude enough to bring up such nonsense. A tabloid reporter, no doubt.

When more press rushed across the tarmac—including a cameraman—she didn't get a chance to identify any one individual.

Who had leaked her arrival? She hadn't realized the area had so many media outlets. This was Pleasant Valley, for goodness' sake. When she'd grown up here, the place had been nothing but villages orbiting towns defined by how long a drive it was to civilization.

Five minutes into the Valley.

Fifteen minutes into Poughkeepsie.

A half hour to the mall.

Two hours to the city—Manhattan and definite civilization.

"No comment on Emmelina's wedding." She projected her voice and the reporters quieted. "And, yes, I'm pleased to announce that Worldwide Weddings Unlimited is contracted for Kate Cochran's event. That's breaking news since we went to contract right before I left the Manhattan office an hour ago. And do you really think I'd hide from an anonymous blogger who can't be troubled to sign his or her name to erroneous posts?"

Posts that appeared to have no purpose other than casting doubt on Lily's reputation? She hadn't expected legitimate media to give credence to such nonsense. "I'm sorry to disappoint you, my friends, but I've come to town for a family wedding."

"Haven't heard anything about a family wedding on the wire services. Are you attending or planning the event?"

She spotted the reporter who had asked the question. Poughkeepsie Journal. She'd answer. "Both actually. Can't have a wedding planner in the family without asking for input. Not if there's to be peace at the event, anyway."

Laughter erupted from the crowd and camera shutters clicked wildly.

"Will you comment on the All About Angel blog, Lily Susan?"

Lily Susan.

The only people on the planet who used her first and middle names together were family, so her gaze automatically zeroed in... Her breath caught as she saw the familiar man standing half a head above the crowd. Not family. And how had she missed him? Despite the two dozen people huddled around him, suddenly, he was all she could see.

Max Downey.

The same glossy dark hair. The same chiseled face. The same fast smile.

Had the inquiry come from anyone else, Lily would have offered a quip these reporters could milk in print for all they were worth. But Max owned the Mid-Hudson Herald, a legitimate media corporation, even if his questions hadn't sounded like it—not when he was asking about the All About Angel blog.

From him the question took her so off guard she could barely think let alone quip, with her heart pounding too hard. Their gazes met across the distance...?

All these years and his piercing green eyes still tied her tongue in a knot.

But Lily wasn't the same young girl who had nursed a crush on her big brother's best friend. Max's flashing dimples and deep voice could no longer take possession of her reactions and make her blush like a teenager.

Especially when he asked such idiotic questions.

"Last I heard you owned the Herald, Mr. Downey. Don't you have professionals on staff who know the difference between relevant and irrelevant questions?"

More laughter. More clicking cameras. The video was rolling, too.

Max cocked his head to the side and glanced at her with an expression that was amusement and arrogance rolled into one. "Yes to both questions."

"Both?" She arched a quizzical eyebrow.

"Yes, I have professionals on staff and, yes, I have a relevant question." Wealth and privilege radiated from him, in his matter-of-fact tone and his confident manner. There was no mistaking that he was a man used to getting what he wanted.

Lily knew it was coming before he even opened his mouth. It shouldn't have taken her so long to make the connection because this man shouldn't still have the ability to rob her of her faculties. She wasn't thirteen anymore. Suddenly she remembered the inquiry that had arrived by fax to her office yesterday.

"Lily Susan, will you confirm that Worldwide Weddings Unlimited intends to contract Lieutenant Colonel Girard's wedding before he begins his campaign for governor?"

Sure enough...

From Lily's vantage she saw every head swivel toward Max. There were gasps and lots of scrambling for hand-held recorders to capture the breaking political news.

Lily wondered if there were laws against airing a live murder because she intended to kill Max as soon as she could get her hands on him. The only thing saving him was the press leaping all over his political announcement.

"Downey, what do you know about the candidate?"

"What's the candidate's political affiliation?"

"What makes the candidate think he stands a chance in the gubernatorial election against the incumbent?"

The balance shifted and this became Max's press conference. Not as impromptu as hers, because the man clearly had an agenda, but Lily was impressed as much by the reporters' ability to switch gears as she was by Max's self-possession.

"Lieutenant Colonel Raymond Girard is my late wife's brother," Max explained. "His second tour in Afghanistan ends next May, and he'll be retiring from military service. After he comes home, he hopes to continue serving his country as governor of this fine State of New York."

"Who's the candidate marrying?"

"Second Lieutenant Jamilyn Carmichael. She's serving in Iraq. Hence, the need for the Wedding Angel to plan the ceremony. They have leave around the holidays and want an event at my family estate that will launch him into the public."

The family estate. Overlook.

Just the thought tugged at Lily's heartstrings. Every wedding she'd ever fantasized about as a girl had been set on the gorgeous grounds of the estate overlooking the Hudson River.

"Are you using your business connection to the Wedding Angel to get her to coordinate the wedding?"

Abusing that connection, more accurately.

But this reporter knew local history, at least, when it was obvious many didn't. Heads swiveled around to Lily as if this was the first they'd heard about a Worldwide-Weddings-Unlimited and Downey-family connection, both personal and professional.

Lily wrested control of the conversation again.

“I expect the bride and groom will want peace at their event since they’ve both been living on the front lines.”

“The Wedding Angel can provide peace. She’s the best in the business,” Max said softly, but his voice carried. She detected a hint of a challenge in his demeanor.

“I thank you all for your interest, but a response would be premature. I simply don’t have any answers except to say Mr. Downey’s inquiry will follow standard Worldwide Wedding Unlimited precontract procedure.”

She flashed a professional smile. “But I can promise you after his inquiry undergoes the review process your media outlets will be given an exclusive. Please fax or email the manager at my local office and mention this press conference. She’ll make sure you know as soon as a decision about the Carmichael-Girard event is finalized.”

That got a round of applause, but Lily knew there wouldn’t be any news because she had veto power. And this event was vetoed already.

She couldn’t handle another rush-job right now. Not so soon after planning her own hurried wedding, an event she’d whipped together during a whirlwind engagement that had gone belly-up in a public way. She’d salvaged what she could from the wreckage, but Lily didn’t doubt these reporters knew all the gory details.

She’d turned the wedding of her dreams into a full-scale charity event, because she’d refused to waste a perfectly amazing party. Since the venue had been a palace on the Dalmatian Coast—a favorite getaway for her and Lucas—the organization she chose as recipient supported war orphans in the former Yugoslavia. Fortunately, the response had been impressive.

At least she’d been able to feel good about that.

But the emotional upheaval had taken its toll, and she’d come home because she needed to regroup and reenergize her depleted batteries and heal before she burned out her creativity completely. Max had no business putting her on the spot—and on the record—this way. If he thought this public announcement would persuade her...

She was here to plan her sister-in-law Riley’s wedding—a tiny affair Lily could plan in her sleep.

“Thank you for the welcome reception,” Lily addressed the crowd. “I hope I’ve answered your questions.” Too bad she couldn’t answer her own. Like why she’d allowed her life to spin out of control and would she ever regain her equilibrium?

She might have the skills to fake the professional image, but inside her nerves were rattled. Why was Max trying to add more chaos to her life?

Retrieving her belongings, she turned to thank the pilot who appeared behind her then headed down the steps.

The crowd parted as she made her way toward the terminal of the private airstrip. She didn’t slow down until she was inside, away from the reporters who were trailing her. Her baggage already waited on a trolley. Glancing around for assistance, she guessed her dad must be outside to pick her up since he wasn’t in here.

Max entered. Tall and attractive with his glossy hair and light eyes, he looked the way he always had with those broad shoulders and long-legged strides. But what had happened to his good sense? Putting her on the spot that way. Honestly.

Even when he’d been in college, he’d kept his cool after he caught her drinking apple-blossom wine with her teenage friends in the Main Mall parking garage. He’d promised not to tell—this time. But he’d threatened to tell her parents if he ever caught her drinking again. Then he’d insisted on driving her home.

And kept his word.

He headed toward a bench, where he scooped up a trench coat. After sliding on the coat, he turned that striking gaze on her. Her heartbeat rocketed.

“Why are you here?” she asked. “Did you think that public announcement would get you what you want?”

He closed the distance between them, making her suddenly so aware of how she had to tilt her head back to meet his gaze.

“I’m here to give you a ride home.” Stepping around her, he reached for the trolley. “Your father sent me.”

“Why? Is he all right?”

“He’s fine.” Everything about him struck her as masculine, in charge.

“If he was busy, why didn’t my mom come?”

The dimples flashed as he turned on the charm. “You know your mother. With the prodigal returning, she invited everyone for dinner. She’s been cooking and cleaning. I offered because I wanted to talk to you about my brother-in-law’s wedding.”

He sounded wistful, almost as if he longed to have someone at home preparing for his return. Lily swallowed an urge to blast him for his comments at the press conference. How could she? How did one blast a man who had lost most of his family in a car accident? His wife, pregnant with their son, had been killed instantly and their young daughter had barely survived.

True, the accident had happened two years ago, but this was the first time she’d seen Max. She’d been out of the country at the time and while she would have dropped everything to make the trip home, he hadn’t had a funeral service. With his daughter fighting for her life, he and his wife’s family had opted for a simple memorial mass at church.

“Thank you, Max. I appreciate the lift.”

“No problem.”

His opinion, maybe, not hers. She’d need to arrange for a rental. Driving was the only way to get around this town. No matter what kind of wedding Riley wanted, there would be running around to pull everything together.

Good, Lily’s head was back on business, and she was starting to wrap her brain around things. She walked beside Max as he wheeled the trolley toward the terminal entrance. She darted ahead to grab the door, remembering the restored Karmann Ghia he’d owned once upon a time. Hopefully whatever he drove today had a bit more room. She’d packed for a month-long trip.

Max led her to a late-model SUV parked directly in front. He clicked open the hatch to reveal a cluttered space. Bed pillows in bright pink pillowcases. A Hello Kitty blanket hanging over the backseat. A Dora the Explorer backpack. A rhinestone slipper that could have been Cinderella’s.

His daughter’s things.

The sight of his large, competent hands shoving aside pink blankets and frilly pillows to make room for her luggage struck Lily like a fist in the gut.

This was reality. The reality that he’d lost his wife, the woman he’d loved. Lily swallowed around the lump in her throat. She’d been running, working, running. The last time she’d been home had been for another funeral. For her funny, kindhearted, always-crusading-for-lost-causes twin brother.

Her better half, as he’d always said.

Both she and Max had lost people they’d loved and life would never be the same again.

CHAPTER TWO

“LISTEN, MAX.” Lily placed a hand on his sleeve, waiting until he looked down with a gaze that suddenly felt unfamiliar. “I haven’t seen you since Felicia and your son. I never had the chance to tell you how sorry I was.”

His lips compressed, his expression so very resigned. He knew this drill. “You sent your regrets.”

“I know. Flowers and Mass cards. You replied with a thank-you. It’s not the same as telling you. Mom and Joey keep me up on how you and Madeleine are doing. I just wanted you to know.”

He didn’t say another word, but his chiseled jaw tightened as he packed her bags into the vehicle. It was as if he’d drawn an invisible shield around him that warned her to back off. There was something so solitary about this Max, so dramatically different than the Max of her memory.

That Max used to show up at her family’s totally average split-level house for any excuse under the sun, from meals to cards to football to hanging out with her brother Joey. That Max also had a cook on staff and lived in a grand historic home overlooking the Hudson that had been in his family for generations and had boasted neighbors such as the Roosevelts and Vanderbilts.

Despite the rose-colored glasses of her teenage crush, Lily had never understood him or how he could be so enamored of her family. As wonderful as they were, they didn’t exist in the same realm as the Downeys. The family business was a hardware store in the Valley, while the Downeys had so many business interests she couldn’t have counted them on two hands.

The differences in him were accounted for by tragedy. That hurt. She hated seeing how life had battered around the kind, often-charming guy who had evoked loyalty and devotion so deep down inside her.

Had inspired her wildest fantasies.

Despite her annoyance with him, she wanted him to know that her expression of sorrow was more than words. But she didn’t want to remind him of painful memories and changed the subject.

“Mom says Madeleine started kindergarten last month,” she said. “How’s that going? Does she like school?”

Lily knew she’d struck gold before Max turned over the ignition. Everything about him relaxed, and she recognized him again, could even see a hint of a dimple in his animated expression.

“She loves it. Can’t wait to get out the door in the morning. She was student of the week the very first week.”

“That’s wonderful. You must be very proud. I hope she stays excited straight through college.”

“Wouldn’t that be nice?” He gave a laugh. “I suppose I’ll take whatever I can get. I had no clue what to expect, and Riley was killing me with her horror stories.”

Lily’s sister-in-law had worked for Max since an internship at Vassar College. Max had actually been the one to send Riley on assignment to cover the concert where she’d met Mike. Riley still worked for Max, only as a managing editor now, which had more predictable hours for a widow with twins.

A widow who would soon be a bride again.

“I’m sure Madeleine is a total doll,” Lily said. “Not like Camille and Jake. Twins can be a handful on a good day.”

“As you would know firsthand.”

“True, true.” Only she and Mike would never get into trouble together again. “But I don’t remember Mike giving Mom a hard time about going to school the way Jake gave Riley. Of course, I was an angel.”

Max snorted.

“Seriously, it must be a boy thing. You have nothing to worry about.”

Max sliced his gaze her way, clearly gauging whether or not she was teasing him.

Lily kept a straight face, determined to keep things light. For a long few moments, they sat in silence as Max drove toward the Valley. There were houses where forested hills had been. There had been road expansions. There was even a strip plaza filled with businesses around the corner from her old elementary school. “I can’t believe how much this place has grown since I’ve been home. It hasn’t been all that long.”

“Four years.”

“I’ve been a topic at the dinner table.” Not a question.

Max nodded, clearly knowing better than to offer more information.

“All right, be like that. Let me ask you, though—who called me the prodigal?”

“I did.” She got the sense he was picking his way through a mine field. “Seemed to fit.”

“How’s that?”

He raised his hands against the steering wheel, as much of a conciliatory gesture as he could make while still driving. “Not looking to weigh in with an opinion. It just seemed to work because you’ve been away awhile.”

Lily might accept that at face value, but the deeper implications bothered her.

Was PMS or exhaustion making her touchy today? Or was it anxiety about returning home for the first time since Mike? Or was Max unsettling her because he’d blindsided her at the press conference and brought up that stupidity with the blog? Or worse still, was she annoyed with herself because she couldn’t forget her crush on him?

Lily didn’t know. She hadn’t intended to rise to the bait, either, but...the years had only defined Max’s chiseled cheekbones. And his haunted eyes had an appeal all their own. “Okay, Max. I’m sensing something here. Are you annoyed I didn’t agree to contract your brother-in-law’s wedding when you put me on the spot? And while we’re at it let me ask if there was any point to bringing up that ridiculous blog.”

He had the audacity to look surprised. “I thought the point of a press conference was to give the media something to write about. Raymond’s campaign and that controversial blog will give you tons of mileage. I thought I was doing you a favor.”

“I’d prefer not to give the blogger any attention.”

“A platform for someone with an ax to grind?”

“Possibly. But if that’s the case, I can’t imagine whom.”

“Emmelina seems pretty upset.”

“Emmelina would love someone to blame. She trashed her career for a man who cheated on his wife and left her at the altar. But she hasn’t mentioned me because she knows better. Mara’amu wasn’t responsible. Had the winds been up, I would have moved the ceremony indoors.”

“What happened then?”

“Ugh. A tabloid reporter trying to beat out the competition. He evaded security, tripped over his own video equipment and crashed into one of the dancers. Of course, only the resort security cameras had caught that on film and they wouldn’t release the footage.”

“You could have given a statement.”

“I will not dignify this stupidity with a defense.”

Max didn’t look convinced, which annoyed Lily more.

“Also for the record, the point of not releasing my travel information was so the press didn’t have anything to write about. I would have thought that much should be obvious to you, as you’re privy to intimate details about my personal life.”

Too many, it would seem.

He lingered at a traffic light after the signal turned green as he frowned at her. “Are you saying you didn’t call that press conference?”

Now it was Lily’s turn to frown. “Are you telling me you didn’t leak my travel plans?”

“Of course not. Riley made it a point of telling me that you were keeping your arrival on the Q.T. And your mom. And dad. And my mother. Hmm...let me think. There wasn't anyone who didn't mention it. That's why I was so surprised when my assistant told me she got a notice with your arrival details.”

Lily stared at the road ahead. “Well, that's interesting. I wonder who leaked the information. That was quite a crowd. By any chance do you still have the notice?”

“I'll ask my assistant. It was an email, I believe.”

No surprises there. Wasn't as easy to cause trouble using fax and a landline. Or snail mail, either. But emails could be bounced all over the globe via satellite to effectively mask the sender. As she'd learned while trying to discover the identity of the culprit behind the All About Angel blog and got quoted privacy laws for the effort.

Now someone close enough to know her travel plans thought it was okay to leak to the press. Lovely. And she'd thought her plate was already full.

“Why would you think I'd reveal your plans?” Max asked.

“You were capitalizing on the moment, if memory serves.”

He slowed to navigate a sharp turn. “Back to the point of a press conference. Assuming you'd arranged it—which I did—I thought you'd appreciate the connection between you and the exclusive about Raymond's campaign. I seized an opportunity. For both of us.”

“I haven't contracted the wedding. We haven't even spoken about it.”

“I didn't want to waste any time.”

“You seem to have bypassed the part about choice, Max. Don't I get one?”

“In case you haven't noticed, I made it a point not to go through my mother.”

“Why?”

“Because I didn't want you to feel pressured. I thought Raymond's wedding would be right up your alley. And the timing couldn't be more perfect since you'll already be in town.”

“I'm here to whip up a family wedding.”

“I know. But I need you to whip up one for me, too. I realize the time frame is somewhat of a challenge, but you're the Wedding Angel.” He flashed that dashing grin, dimples and all, but Lily couldn't seem to move past a few tiny words.

Somewhat of a challenge?

She was somewhat speechless. It took her a moment and a few deep breaths, but she did manage to squeeze out a question purely for clarification purposes. “I thought you said Raymond and Jamilyn had leave around the holidays.”

“I did.”

“Christmas is barely twelve weeks away.”

He shook his head. “Thanksgiving. They'll be on duty before Christmas.”

Lily could only stare. Did the man think she snapped her fingers and—poof—a media-worthy fantasy magically appeared out of thin air? Was it possible he didn't realize there was actual work involved? Including seventeen thousand decisions about the venue, catering, costuming, licensing, guests... Hadn't he walked down the aisle once himself?

“Max, seriously. Have you lost your mind? Thanksgiving is eight weeks away.”

“How hard can it be? You'll be planning Riley's wedding. Can't you do one more of whatever you do for her? You know, order two cakes instead of one. That sort of thing.”

Condescension? Did he think she was exaggerating?

“No. No. No.” Why didn't she remember Max being so dense? “Riley wants a simple affair. A wedding for the twins because I think she and Scott would be happy at the courthouse. They want tasteful, which will be challenging given the circumstances.”

“I wonder why she called you then.”

“That’s why she called me.” Lily really didn’t remember Max being this obtuse. If she had, surely she wouldn’t have spent so many years imagining him as the groom in all her weddings. “Scott was my brother’s best friend and partner. The situation has potential for social awkwardness since they all have the same friends and this town is so small. She doesn’t want to elope and leave the twins feeling less than excited about their changing family. Riley trusts me to figure out what’ll make everyone happy. You, on the other hand, want me to whip up a full-scale wedding on a dime.”

“I thought that’s what you did.”

“I create fantasies, and fantasies take time. An intimate family wedding is another beast from the extravaganza you want.”

“You’ve got eight weeks.”

This man... “I am not planning Raymond’s wedding.”

She didn’t feel obligated to explain. Even if he wasn’t being so high-handed, she had no intention of explaining that she’d come home to kick back, regroup and relax.

And while she rested, her crews would be working overtime. They needed to focus on the current contracts to ensure every t was crossed and every i dotted so there weren’t any more disasters. And she’d still be working by cell phone, laptop and fax. To take on even one more project would be insane.

Perhaps there was another solution, and out of respect for the man’s losses and the close connections between their families... “What if I arrange something with this office? Your mother is still my partner in that particular venture.”

He shook his head decidedly. “I want you.”

Max and everyone else. But there was some childish, forbidden and undeniably sick part of her that thrilled to hear those words. Ugh. She waved him off with a dismissive hand. “Unavailable. I’m tired. Can’t you see the circles under my eyes?”

He gave her a sideways glance. “You look fantastic.”

“The concealer I’m wearing is fantastic. Underneath...not so much.”

“Are you fishing for compliments? I’ll gladly give them, Lily Susan.”

Lily Susan.

What was it about her name said in that voice that still dissolved her insides into jelly? Even when he was arguing with her?

She would not dignify his comment with a response. He took the last turn out of the Valley onto the road that would lead to the house where she’d grown up. She had no desire whatsoever to continue this conversation, so she whipped out her BlackBerry and logged on to Twitter.

Okay, so who leaked my travel plans? LOL I arrived safely in my hometown to find the media waiting. Unexpected but lovely reception. Hello again, Pleasant Valley! Blessings to all;-)

Lily depressed the send button, tweeting her followers on the status of her arrival.

What she really wanted to write was: Hell is a real place, people, not some fiery netherworld across death. It’s right here on earth in a town deceptively named Pleasant Valley. I know because I’m in it.

CHAPTER THREE

WHAT WAS IT about Lily Susan that always took Max so off guard? He wasn't sure. But he was on edge. The feeling was vaguely familiar. He resisted the urge to flip on the radio and nix the possibility of further conversation when she fell silent, so obviously annoyed.

She thought he was a jerk. Maybe he was. But there was a method to his madness. She needed to plan Raymond's wedding—not an assistant. Because it was Lily Susan herself who garnered publicity. And his brother-in-law needed all the free publicity he could get to launch his political campaign. Max would see that it happened. Period. Besides, her own family was worried about her and wanted her to stay in town as long as possible.

While he was uncomfortable pushing himself onto Lily Susan, he wouldn't back down. She was the one Angelica who had never felt much like part of the family. To him, anyway. But he didn't have room to talk, since he wasn't technically family, either.

But long ago Max had learned that Joe and Rosie Angelica operated on a philosophy that transcended blood. Family by love, they called it. Through the years, Max had learned those ties bound tight. He'd been grateful for this family since long before he'd even understood what he was grateful for.

Love and support. Selflessness instead of selfishness. The things that counted as far as Max was concerned.

Looking for a place to park in front of the neatly kept house, Max wondered if his passenger's mood would be improved by her welcome committee. Cars filled the driveway and spilled into the cul-de-sac. No one would dare park on the lawn, lest they incur Joe's wrath.

"Wow, I thought everyone would be at work or school."

Max couldn't tell whether or not a big reception was a good thing. "You're surprised?"

"Not surprised," was all she said as he maneuvered the car against a curb.

"I'll bring your things inside," he told her.

"Thanks. No hurry."

She didn't move though, and he thought she was waiting for him to get her door. He had his own opened before noticing how still she was. In his periphery, he saw her inhale deeply.

Nerves? From a woman who could work the media and address massive crowds in her sleep? That couldn't be right. By the time he circled the car and got her door, he found Lily Susan her usual gracious, poised self.

They wove a path through the cars, her long, lean legs easily matching his pace. Max wasn't surprised by the royal welcome. This family had been waiting a long time for their youngest to come home.

He got a welcome reception himself when the screen door shot open and his daughter appeared.

She skipped down the stairs with a light step, black ponytail bobbing, excitement glowing from her.

His pulse lurched at the sight. It was a familiar reaction, the instant he came face-to-face with the fact that everything that mattered in his life was all wrapped up in his little girl. There was always a second of awe that she was real.

And alive.

"Daddy!"

Max wished that squeal of delighted glee had to do with him as much as their guest. But his daughter was caught up in the excitement of Lily Susan's homecoming.

Striding ahead, he braced himself as Madeleine leaped into his arms. Catching her against him, he twirled her around, eliciting another squeal—this one all for him. She tilted her cheek for a kiss, but her curious gaze fixed over his shoulder on the woman behind him.

“Is that her?” Madeleine asked almost reverently.

Max kissed her again to hide his smile. “It is. I’ll introduce you.”

Letting his daughter slide to the ground, he straightened. To his surprise, he found Lily Susan already dropping to Madeleine’s height, which brought his attention to her graceful neck and feminine shoulders in a way he’d have to be dead not to notice.

But he was only dead on the inside.

Smiling warmly, she extended her hand. “Bonjour, Mademoiselle Madeleine. Ça fait plaisir de te revoir. Nous nous sommes rencontrés quand tu étais une petite fille. Regarde-toi. Tu as grandi pour être très, très belle.”

“Merci, madame.” Madeleine beamed, clearly surprised their guest spoke French. Grown up and beautiful—a double compliment if Max’s translation was close. His French was rudimentary at best. She politely replied how pleased she was to see Lily Susan again, too, but Max knew his daughter had no memory of their previous meeting. She’d barely been two the last time Lily Susan had graced the family with her presence.

Felicia had spoken French to their daughter since birth even though her parents had moved to the States before she or Raymond had been born. Max had kept up the tutoring by bringing an au pair from France who was a relative of the Girard family.

Lily Susan had told him she’d been keeping up with his family, and he was astounded she was interested in what was happening in a place she couldn’t find time to visit.

He was also astounded by the way she engaged his daughter in a chat about kindergarten and teachers and friends—in a random mix of English and French Felicia would have appreciated.

Kneeling in the leaf-strewn yard, Lily Susan listened intently to a story about the student-of-the-week breakfast reception that served cookies. Her whiskey-gold hair tumbled down her back, and her long skirt emphasized sleek legs as she wrapped her arms around her knees and nodded in all the appropriate places.

His daughter was generally reserved around strangers, but with the attention Lily Susan graciously provided, she was shedding her shell.

“You got to be on The Morning Show with your student-of-the-week ribbon, too? Wow. Does everyone watch The Morning Show?”

“Oui, madame.” Madeleine beamed. “Even the fifth graders and the patrols.”

Lily Susan gave a suitably impressed gasp. And he was impressed she knew what an elementary-school patrol was.

They made quite a sight. Lily Susan in all her designer-clothes glory. Madeleine, still bearing evidence of summer swimming lessons and weekends spent at the lake. She’d been nut-brown by Labor Day, compliments of Moroccan ancestors. He wondered if their son would have had his mother’s skin, too.

Not the first time he’d wondered.

“Aunt Lily Susan!” More squeals as the screen door creaked open and Riley’s twins burst onto the porch.

“We’ll make time later to chat.” Lily Susan gave Madeleine’s hands a little squeeze before she stood. “I want to hear more about your appearance on The Morning Show.”

His daughter nodded eagerly then Lily Susan was spreading her arms wide to greet her new visitors.

“My little twinnies!”

Riley’s kids weren’t so little anymore. Jake and Camille were a whopping almost nine years old, as Jake was fond of reminding everyone. But they were thrilled to see their aunt, and he witnessed firsthand the results of Riley’s determination to keep everyone in touch with text, email and phone calls.

Max bore a similar responsibility. Felicia's family was all Madeleine would ever have of her mother. If his in-laws hadn't been so accessible, he would have made the same effort as Riley.

He hung on to his daughter's hand while Lily Susan hugged her niece and nephew. "I can't believe how tall you've both gotten. How long has it been since I've seen you—a year?"

"Not a year, silly." Camille laughed. "We saw you this summer. Don't you remember we went on the boat ride to the Statue of Liberty?"

"How could I forget? You hid so we missed the ferry back."

Camille giggled and Lily Susan ruffled that white-blond head fondly.

"You're such a little squirrel," she said. "It just feels like forever since I've seen you."

While Lily Susan laughed and chattered cheerily, she seemed to be hanging on to the twins for dear life, unable to stop touching and kissing them. Did she see her brother in them? Max remembered how close she and Mike had been.

"Well, it's about damned time," a loud voice boomed from the doorway. Joey appeared with his wife, Sarah, behind him, and shoved open the screen door so hard the hinges groaned. "Your father's about to disown you because he can't remember what you look like."

Actually, Joey was the one about to disown his baby sister, as Max well knew.

"Then he must be getting senile since I saw him two months ago," Lily Susan replied.

Angelicas poured onto the lawn calling out greetings. That was the last Max saw of Lily Susan as the family converged on her. He knew they would all wind up in the kitchen, so he broke from the crowd and headed to the car to unload the luggage.

Madeleine didn't want any part of leaving the chaos. She stuck like glue to Camille, who stuck like glue to her aunt. He wasn't surprised his daughter was so caught up in the whole Wedding Angel craze. Lily Susan was the family celebrity, and Madeleine had been listening to everyone discuss her long-awaited return. Particularly Camille, who idolized her aunt and with whom Madeleine spent a good deal of time.

Riley's twins were the youngest of all the Angelica cousins, so Madeleine was a welcome addition at family gatherings as the one person who was younger. For Camille anyway, who enjoyed sharing girl things like manicures and hairstyles—the types of activities mothers and daughters shared, but daddies were uncomfortable with, no matter how hard they tried.

And try though Max might, the nuances of shimmery nail polish escaped him.

He'd barely reached the car when he realized that Scott had caught up with him.

"Need a hand?" he asked.

Max nodded. "Anyone but Lily Susan, and I'd think she was moving in for good."

Scott eyed the hatch and backseat stacked with suitcases and nodded. "Sure looks like it."

Max liked Scott Emerson. He was another honorary Angelica family member. He'd been Mike's partner on the vice squad before Mike had met Riley. Scott was now the chief of detectives, and if Max's sources were correct—which they usually were—Scott was being groomed to become Poughkeepsie's chief of police.

Once he married Riley, he wouldn't be an honorary member of the Angelicas anymore. He'd be the real deal.

Between them, they managed the luggage with one trip and headed inside by way of the garage. They couldn't escape the chaos, which had started trickling in by the time they'd stowed the bags in Lily Susan's old bedroom upstairs. Max got trapped on the staircase behind Scott, unable to make his way into the hallway through the crowd burrowing to get in from the cold.

An expectant hush fell over the noisy family when Lily Susan approached the stairs. While she'd known of the relationship developing between Scott and Riley for a long time and had agreed to plan the wedding, Lily Susan hadn't actually seen Scott in person since the engagement.

"Finally, here's the groom. I wondered where you were." She stopped the flow of traffic and smiled at him, obliging him to step off the stairs for a hug.

Max heard her whisper, “Couldn’t ask for anyone better to be dad to my little twinnies.”

Her gracious acceptance smoothed over a tough moment, and the effect was visible. Scott gave her a hug that practically lifted her off the ground. “Welcome home, Lily Susan. Thanks for making the trip.”

“Wouldn’t miss your wedding for the world.” When she was on her feet again, she winked at him. “Even if I didn’t need to plan the whole thing.”

With a laugh he moved to let traffic pass, and Max caught sight of Riley and her suspiciously misty gaze.

Bravo for Lily Susan. She might have been away from the family for a while, but distance didn’t mean she couldn’t come through for the people who loved her when it counted.

And that was a very Angelica trait.

CHAPTER FOUR

MAX CAUGHT UP with his daughter again, and they made their way through the kitchen to the adjoining dining room, where so many chairs had been jammed around the table people would be practically sitting on top of each other. Sturdy card tables had been added on both ends to eliminate the need to separate adults and kids. This made Madeleine happy, but there were so many place settings another fork couldn't be set between them. He wondered where Rosie intended to put the food.

"Come on, come on. Find a seat." Joe herded everyone into the dining room impatiently. "Lily Susan, you sit there."

Max watched Lily Susan head to her honorary place at the center of the table, knowing he didn't stand a chance at getting close. The best he could do was grab a spot across from her, where he had a decent view.

He was surprised by how much he wanted a view. Lily Susan had changed into casual sportswear, the fabric clinging to her every lean curve.

Thankfully the chaos distracted him from thoughts that were traveling in unexpected directions. Everyone knew the drill and was soon crammed elbow-to-elbow. Joey and his wife Sarah and their three kids. Caroline and her husband Alex and their three kids. Riley and Scott and the twins. Only Joe didn't sit. He was the pulse of the family, with his bald head and hearty laughter—the one who roused everyone into action, the one they all went to for advice or opinions.

And if Joe was the pulse, then Rosie was the heart. She set the tone with her hugs. When she was happy, her nicknames for everyone were happy. Her husband was Joe and her son Joey. When she wasn't, though, those nicknames were warnings. Joe and Joey became Old Man and Little Boy or Fat Joe and Healthy Joe when she was on a tear about someone's eating habits.

Still, Rosie managed to keep everyone close with her nurturing kindnesses. A thousand kindnesses.

Max didn't know what he would have done without her through Madeleine's recovery during the long months after the accident. And he didn't understand how Lily Susan could have spent so much time away from this warm and gregarious group.

"Close your eyes, honey-bunch," Joe commanded Lily Susan in his booming voice. "Jake, make sure she doesn't peek."

Jake, who had claimed the spot to his aunt's right, crawled to his knees in the chair, stretching his hands over her face. She laughed good-naturedly, and Joe made a production of going to the refrigerator then returning to the table. He plunked down a glass jar in the middle of her plate.

"Good job, kiddo. Let her look."

Jake sprang back, and Lily Susan glanced down. Her lush lips parted then broke into a smile. A real smile. Not the kind she'd been giving Max. Instead of warm and happy, she gave him cool and professional. He wondered why he noticed that she seemed to save her warmth for children and preserved vegetables.

"Aunt Nellie's pickled beets?" She laughed. "Daddy, you remembered."

"Of course I remembered. They're your favorite." Joe handed her a fork. "You don't even have to share."

There was no missing how his expression blurred around the edges when he dropped a kiss onto the top of his youngest daughter's head. Lily Susan's eyes fluttered shut for the briefest moment, a rare sign of emotion for a woman so skilled at keeping up appearances.

Taking his seat at the head of the table, Joe said, "Let's eat."

The meal began with a blessing then conversations erupted randomly as kids vied with adults to steal Lily Susan's attention with stories of what was happening in Pleasant Valley. There was a lot to relate. Phone calls could never take the place of Sunday dinners for filling in the details.

Lily Susan fostered the conversations with her questions, asking far more than she shared. But there was one subject that was noticeably avoided by everyone: her broken engagement.

No one asked, and she didn't offer. Not a word about how she was doing although every adult asked leading questions. Lily Susan skillfully deflected them all. So he wasn't the only one who got the professional treatment. She was closed with the people who cared so much about her.

And why did that thought make him feel better?

Why was he so aware of her?

She was a beautiful woman, no question. Photos of her crossed his desk all the time, but Max had to admit that no photo came close to doing justice to the real woman. She was a media darling for good reason with a sweet, heart-shaped face. Her Italian heritage lent her an interesting blend of earthiness and wholesomeness with her light olive skin, whiskey-gold hair and caramel-colored eyes.

And that mouth of hers played so well to the camera, whether she was talking, laughing, smiling, kissing...

He remembered one photo in particular. The paparazzi had snapped the shot after she'd announced her engagement. She and her fiancé had been celebrating with friends on a yacht in the French Riviera, their heads close as they kissed.

Max wasn't sure why he remembered. Maybe because they had seemed so different from the Angelica family he knew. They seemed matched to each other. Both ambitious. Both part of the jet set. Both tanned in their Mediterranean near-nudity, sipping champagne on a yacht, creating the illusion of fantasy romance.

The picture had looked perfect. Apparently the perfection had been an illusion since the ex-fiancé had proven himself a world-class deadbeat. The man hadn't troubled himself to come here to meet his fiancée's family—Joe and Rosie had been forced to travel into the city. That said something. As far as Max was concerned that something wasn't good breeding.

To this day, Joey had never met him.

"A matter of principle," he'd told Max. "If the guy wants the family seal of approval, he'll have to make an effort. Not that family seems important to my sister anymore."

Max understood how Joey felt. But now, watching Lily Susan, he had to wonder why she hadn't brought the man home.

"How will Raymond's wedding impact your plans?" Joey asked her. "Are you going to stay in town or commute from the city?"

Lily Susan shot Max a look that seared a path across the table, but she answered her brother diplomatically. "We haven't quite gotten there yet. Max's inquiry arrived in my office yesterday and I haven't had a chance to figure things out."

"What's to figure?" Joe asked. "You're in town."

"Daddy, my calendar's booked. We schedule a year to eighteen months in advance."

"You've got a lot of offices, honey-bunch. You can't rearrange a few things and make some room? Max needs your help."

That was that as far as Joe was concerned.

The entire table quieted to listen to the exchange, and Lily Susan was suddenly on the spot. Max dodged another glare and leaned back to enjoy the show.

"I understand," she said in a conciliatory tone. "But I'm afraid it's not so simple. A lot of offices means I've got people in four countries at different stages of event planning."

Max recognized the it's-out-of-my-hands approach and knew she intended to turn him down. He wished her luck with that.

"You've been planning weddings since before you could walk." Joey didn't even bother with an attempt at humor. "I thought you were supposed to be good. One little wedding shouldn't be that big a deal."

“In case it slipped your notice, Joey, I’m already planning one little wedding. That’s the reason I’m here.”

“How in hell could I not notice?” he scoffed. “Weddings and funerals. You don’t bother coming home for anything else.”

There was a collective gasp, and Joe growled at his oldest son. Lily Susan didn’t visibly react—she was too skilled to let emotion bleed through her lovely veneer—but Rosie stepped into the breach with evasive maneuvers as she returned from the kitchen, where she’d been refilling a gravy boat with sauce for the manicotti.

“Lily Susan, if you help Max with the wedding, you’ll have all of us to assist. I’m sure everyone would look forward to spending some time with you. Isn’t that right?”

Nods and enthusiastic consents all around.

“I appreciate that, but everyone has a life. And the time constraints will make the planning a challenge, not to mention that the couple isn’t here. That’s going to complicate things further. There’ll be a zillion decisions and interviews and fittings—”

“I thought you specialized in destination weddings.” Joey wasn’t helping the cause with his hostility. “At least that’s what your website says.”

Lily Susan frowned. “Destination for the wedding, Joey. I consult with the couple in person.”

He apparently didn’t have an answer for that, and Sarah, who was positively scowling, must have kicked him because he winced then glared at her.

Lily Susan seized her chance with both hands. “Please let me explain. There will be decisions that need to be made about every tiny detail before I can arrange anything. If the bride and groom aren’t available, then I have nothing to work with.”

“You’ve got Max.” Joe waved a hand Max’s way. “Raymond and his fiancée asked him to take care of those sorts of things. Isn’t that right?”

“It is.”

Lily Susan fixed her gaze on him, an eyebrow arched. “Jamilyn asked you to try on her wedding dress so the seamstress can fit it, did she?”

At the mention of Max trying on a wedding dress, Jake howled with laughter and got the older cousins going.

“I want to see that,” Caroline’s son Brian said. “Bring a camera.”

“Make it your profile pic on Facebook,” Joey’s daughter suggested.

“Daddy lets me polish his nails,” Madeleine informed the table proudly.

“Pop Scott, you going to let Camille paint your nails?” Jake snickered. “That’s what good stepdads do.”

“Oh, yeah,” Camille chimed in. “Luscious lilac will go perfect with your dress uniform.”

Riley rolled her eyes, but Scott shot a look at his soon-to-be stepchildren and said, “Thank you, Max.”

“No problem.” He ruffled Madeleine’s silky hair.

Lily Susan grinned at her niece. “Camille, we’ll discuss Pop Scott’s polish color once he decides whether he’s wearing his dress blues or a tux. Or his chaps and cowboy hat. I don’t have a clue. Yet.” She spread her hand in entreaty, her expression transforming as she shot Max another glare. “This is exactly what I’m talking about. More decisions come up with the fittings and menu tastings and everything else that makes up the sort of high-profile event Max wants. We’re talking about a wedding at Overlook.”

Rosie set the gravy boat in front of her daughter. “You’ve always wanted to set a real wedding there, ever since you were a little girl. This sounds like the opportunity of a lifetime.”

“That’s true, but not if I have to divert my attention from Riley and Scott. I won’t sacrifice their special day.”

Lily Susan thought fast on her feet. She kept her cool, sounded completely reasonable with her arguments. Max also noticed that she hadn't yet mentioned her vacation or her need to rest. In a way, he almost wished he could give her the time she wanted. Then he'd have time to figure out why he was suddenly thinking of ways he might help her relax.

But his interests weren't the issue here. His brother-in-law needed a wedding and Lily Susan was the perfect person to plan one. Not only did she have expertise, but she'd also guarantee press—an essential element to launch a political campaign.

Joe shot Max a commiserating look. They'd known this wasn't going to be an easy sell. "Of course you can't sacrifice Riley and Scott's wedding, honey-bunch. But you've got nearly four weeks to plan theirs and you seem okay with that. Why can't you hang around a few extra weeks to plan Raymond's?"

Lily Susan finally put two and two together. She'd been set up and knew it.

"Okay, people. Listen to me." Her tone was all about corralling crowds to get things done. "I get that I haven't been home in a while. I'm sorry. I won't make excuses, but I will promise to make more time from now on. I hope you'll take me at my word. I want to help out Max. Truly, I do. But you're asking the impossible. The difference in work between planning an intimate family wedding for sixty guests and a high-profile, five-hundred-plus guest list is staggering. I won't take on an event I can't do well. And when I offered to look into my local office, Max didn't like my suggestion."

Max shook his head. "I want the Wedding Angel."

He didn't say another word because he recognized a few things at that moment. First was that Lily Susan didn't like her family pressuring her on his behalf. She also didn't have a clue about how worried they all were about her. About why she was distancing herself. About how she was handling a very public breakup a mere month before she would have tied the knot.

Max also didn't think she realized how determined her family was. Now that they'd gotten her home, they intended to do whatever it took to keep her here for as long as possible.

"Max, this wedding needs professional and careful attention. Not a rush job." She eyed him stoically. "You need to trust me on this. The press will be all over it."

"That's exactly why we need you."

She made a frustrated noise. "What happened to visiting, as in spending my time catching up and not working?" She dropped her face into her hands.

No one said a word.

Lily Susan didn't look up.

The silence lengthened.

Jake was the first to give in. He rubbed the back of her neck consolingly. "It's okay, Aunt Lily Susan."

Joe caved next. "Honey-bunch, will you promise to give it some thought before you say no? This is important. And if you stay longer, we'll have time for that visiting you're wanting."

She lifted her head and ruffled her nephew's hair, her poise firmly in place. "If I promise to think about it, you've got to promise to accept my answer whether you like it or not."

"Deal." Joe must have decided he'd pushed enough. For now.

They'd reached a truce. Max noticed how relieved she looked—it wasn't obvious but it was there if he looked closely. And he didn't mind looking.

Rosie jumped in to salvage the meal. "I'm sure Lily Susan will do whatever she can to help. Now she just got here, so let's give her a chance to settle in."

"Well, let's say you decide to stay." Joe speared another sausage on the end of his fork. "Hypothetically, of course—"

"Daddy!"

"Old man!"

Caroline switched into protective big-sister mode and elbowed Joe. “Come on, Daddy. Cut Lily Susan a break. She’s the baby, remember. She’s not used to getting pushed around the way you push around the rest of us.” She winked at her sister. “And now that you’re finally here, you can’t stay with Mom and Dad the whole time. You’ve got to spend time with me. When was the last time we had a girls’ night?”

“Or a slumber party,” Riley added. “The kids can stay up late and we can watch Disney movies and eat popcorn—”

“And drink cocoa!” Jake added. “With the big marshmallows.”

“It’ll be like playing musical Aunt Lily Susan,” Camille chimed in, and Riley laughed.

Max grinned, too. He hoped they all had lots of extra space for all her suitcases. Lily Susan didn’t travel light.

Suddenly Madeleine was pulling on his sleeve. “Daddy, I want to play musical Madame Lily Susan, too. She can sleep with me in my princess castle.”

And the conversation split off into smaller ones again.

Lily Susan exhaled a dramatic sigh but kept her mouth shut, clearly refusing to add any fuel to the fire since she was off the hook for the moment. But Max watched her, marveling at how effectively she was able to maintain her poise and reserve. Every one of the Angelicas was grounded and down-to-earth in their own unique way, and all of them were so very open. Not Lily Susan.

His cell phone vibrated at his waist. He reached for it, hoping there wasn’t some emergency at the office that would drag him away, but Madeleine got there ahead of him, her tiny fingers slipping the phone from its case easily.

She glanced at the display. “It’s Goddess.”

“Hop up and take the call into the kitchen.”

Madeleine slid from the chair, whispering into the receiver so loudly the entire table could hear, “Hi, Goddess. It’s me. I have to whisper till I get away from the dinner table.”

“Goddess?” Lily Susan glanced his way, amusement transforming her expression, making her seem relaxed and beautiful. “Your mother?”

Who else’s mother refused to let her granddaughter call her by any name that made her sound old? “She’s probably checking to see if you made it in safely.”

“She knew you were coming to get me?”

He nodded, not wanting to go into the details about how much he’d actually told his mother... and then it hit him. Max suddenly knew exactly what it was about Lily Susan that always took him off guard.

She reminded him more of his family than her own.

CHAPTER FIVE

“MADAME LILY SUSAN,” Madeleine said. “Goddess wants to talk to you.”

“Merci.” Smiling at the little girl, Lily grabbed the phone and dashed to the back porch for privacy.

“Thank you, Ginger,” she whispered into the receiver.

Max’s mother certainly knew how to make an entrance, even on a telephone. Not a surprise. Her last name was Downey. Came with the territory. Even Max, who enjoyed hanging out with Joey with a cold beer after a day bow hunting, was nothing if not socially adept. And always had been. She could remember when Joey had first brought Max home after a baseball game. He’d walked into the kitchen, handsome in his dirty uniform, thrust out his hand to Joe and introduced himself.

“Nice to meet you, sir,” he’d said. “I’m Max Downey.”

He’d seemed the epitome of everything a charming boy should be—everything her big brother wasn’t—and Lily had formed her opinion of what her perfect groom would look like in that instant.

She’d grown up since then, regardless of the way her pulse raced when Max looked at her now.

Slipping through the door, Lily closed it behind her, the chatter of dinner-table conversation muted enough so she could hear. Taking a deep breath, Lily let the calm overtake her. She loved her family, but it didn’t take long for them to make her vibrate with the noise and the demands.

Ginger’s timing was impeccable because Lily could use a few minutes to catch her breath and regroup. Although she should have known Ginger wouldn’t wait until Lily visited their office tomorrow. No, she would want top billing now that her long-time business partner had returned.

“Welcome home, my dear,” said the cultured voice on the other end of the line. “The natives restless?”

“Please remind me never again to let so much time pass between visits.”

“It has been a while.”

“I know.” Lily stopped in front of the picture window and stared out at the yard. The old swing was still there, hanging from a sturdy branch of the oak tree. Her dad had carved and hinged that swing himself. He’d varnished the wood with some cutting-edge product he’d gotten in the hardware store so it would last forever.

Lily remembered swinging on it, faster and higher, as if she could launch herself over the treetops and out of her little world into the great wide somewhere else.

“I have no excuse,” she admitted. “Except there’s been so much going on with work.”

“And your fiancé. Let’s not forget him. No matter what poor choices he made at the end of your relationship, you’ve been involved in a sweeping romance for quite some time.”

Thank you for the reminder, Ginger!

But even Lucas had been about work in a lot of ways. Lily sometimes thought they wouldn’t have been together so long if not for the way their business interests meshed. The wedding world had given them so much common ground. Same crazy schedules. Same business acquaintances. Same friends. They supported each other, liked each other, loved each other even. It had been so easy to be together.

But she couldn’t deny that their relationship had been centered more on business than romance no matter what the press made of it. They’d been comfortable, but lacking in some areas. “I really can’t believe how much time has passed.”

“You’re a busy woman with lots of irons in the fire.”

“True. But no one’s cutting me any slack.”

“Well, try to sympathize with where they’re coming from, my dear. I can’t imagine how I’d feel if one of the boys stayed away so long. At least when they were off at college, they showed up around the holidays for gifts.”

Ginger's boys were now all grown men. Max was her eldest, the heir to the Downey dynasty, so to speak. Her middle son was engaged to a perfectly suitable girl, although no wedding date had been set as of yet. And the youngest who was Ginger's favorite—although she would never admit that aloud—was also following his own life path.

"If Mara wasn't so capable, I'd have to visit our office more often," Lily said to move the conversation along.

"I'm sure she'll be relieved to hear it. But she has a lot of help, you know. Some very exceptional help, I might add."

"I've heard. So why have you been spending so much time in the office?"

"When I saw the numbers on your renovation budget, I shivered to think about the damage Mara could do with such an obscene amount of money to spend. I felt the renovation budget needed competent supervision."

Mara would have been quite capable of handling the renovations, Lily had no doubt, but Ginger had wanted to be involved. And whenever Ginger became involved, she wound up in charge. "I had no choice, Ginger. You know that. Not after the historical society got ahold of the area."

"I do. But I also know you wouldn't make the time to involve yourself, and Mara needed some guidance." She gave a teasing laugh to take the edge from a statement that sounded more like an accusation. "You'll be amazed when you see the place. Photos simply don't do it justice."

It seemed Lily could add another name to the list of people who were feeling ignored.

She could hear laughter through the doors—her family having a good time while she was working.

What else was new?

"Are you still coming into the office tomorrow?" Ginger asked. "I want to be there. I know you'll want to get moving on Raymond's wedding, and Mara's in the middle of the Eversham/Raichle event. Good thing I've been hanging around so much. You're going to need my help."

Lily blinked. "Max told you I'm definitely planning Raymond's wedding?"

"Of course, dear. Why do you sound so surprised? I wasn't. I knew the second he told me about launching Raymond's political career that you'd come up with something brilliant so you could get new photos to add to your website."

She referred, of course, to Worldwide Weddings Unlimited's website. Lily's public relations firm had come up with the idea. They'd taken copies of the childhood photos of Lily with her fairy-inspired woodland weddings, windswept nautical nuptials beside the river and historically themed bridal parties in the church hall to brand the business. Living proof that Lily was the one and only Wedding Angel and always had been.

"I have to tell you, Ginger, I'm concerned that now isn't the best time to attempt a breakneck wedding." Lily planted the seed, hoping beyond hope it would take root. "The press I've been generating lately might not be the best way to launch anyone's career."

There was a beat of silence. Enough time to allow Lily to hope that she might finally get someone in her corner.

"Don't worry too much about your detractors," Ginger said. "That's the nature of the beast. You know that. And you're used to receiving glowing reviews. You've been fortunate. Consider this a challenge to be brilliant and prove them all wrong. Besides, who else would you let plan a wedding at Overlook?"

Every fiber of Lily's being rebelled at being pushed. She needed a rest. Her creativity was suffering. Her mental health, too. She already wanted to escape her family, and now felt the same about Ginger, which told her how close to the edge she was. She needed this vacation like she needed to breathe clean air, like she needed to find her footing again.

But this was Ginger.

Ginger, who had supported Lily when no one else in the world believed in her, let alone been willing to plunk down good money to let a young girl barely out of high school start a business. Max's father ran the bank where she'd applied for the personal loan to get started. He'd called her into his office, praised her aspirations then turned her down cold.

Ginger had reveled in the chance to work in business as a shareholder, to prove to her family she could do something more than charity work. Not only had she provided the starter cash for Worldwide Weddings Unlimited, but she'd also gone head-to-head with Lily's parents, who had been afraid this business would distract Lily from finishing college.

How could she possibly deny Ginger an opportunity to assist planning a family wedding at Overlook?

And Max had known. Stupid man.

No smart man. He'd loaded the bases against her.

Staring into the backyard, Lily wondered if the frayed rope swing was strong enough to bear her weight now. "I would never let anyone else plan a wedding at Overlook."

She was exhausted already. She couldn't possibly get any more tired, could she?

CHAPTER SIX

All About Angel—October 5

The Luck of the Devil

Did the Wedding Angel sell her soul to the devil? Or is she so desperate to get a few nondisastrous events under her belt that she's calling in favors to contract new business?

That's the question readers are asking today.

What other explanation could there be for this breaking news that the Wedding Angel will plan the Carmichael/Girard wedding?

While the names of the bride and groom may not be readily recognizable, their connection to the well-known Downey family may ring some bells.

Raymond Girard is none other than the brother-in-law of Maxim Downey, newspaper magnate and heir to the multigenerational dynasty.

So how did the Wedding Angel—whose tattered reputation has her scurrying into the backwater of her hometown to lick her wounds—manage to contract an event that is sure to garner a vast amount of media attention?

The luck of the devil?

Or, if readers don't have a religious bent there's the much more worldly explanation.

The Wedding Angel is calling in favors.

Let's ask ourselves: who in their right mind would pay seriously good money to invite chaos and mayhem to their special event? People currently under contract must be asking themselves if there's some sort of curse dogging their wedding planner.

And what disaster will strike next?

Of course these unfortunate victims have already paid huge sums to engage her services and don't have much choice but to hold their collective breath and hope her luck isn't devolving into something of monumental proportions.

So the Wedding Angel muscled her way into a new contract that will—let's hope!—clean up her muddied reputation, and she manipulates everyone she knows in the process. Who else but family and close friends would court disaster (and risk political suicide at the all-important start of a career) by allowing the Wedding Angel to plan an event?

Who else, indeed?

Visit the Wedding Angel's photo gallery on her website to see proof of how far back her connection to the Downey family and Overlook goes.

Today's poll: Will the Wedding Angel pull off her own Miracle on the Hudson or will she crash and burn? Cast your vote.

THE BLACKBERRY VIBRATED on Lily's pillow. Her eyes shot open wide and she took in the dark bedroom to orient herself.

Riley's wedding. Pleasant Valley. Her parents' house.

Weird how she'd grown up in this bedroom but no longer thought of it as home. Then again maybe not so weird because a lifetime had passed since she'd lived here. She was on the road so much even her place didn't feel much like home. Blinking away the remnants of sleep, she reached for the phone and glanced at the display. Not her alarm but a text message.

What is going on with the Carmichael/Girard wedding? Anything I need to know?

The message was from her local office manager, Mara, who would—naturally—be in the office before the sun came up. Which was precisely why Lily had promoted Mara from the position of Manhattan assistant to handle this office.

Mara Tepper had been with Worldwide Weddings Unlimited ever since Lily had contracted her as temporary help for the Bristow/Sonnenburg wedding in the Hamptons nearly five years ago.

With half the Democratic National Party in attendance, she'd had to call in two crews from the field, as well as hire local labor.

When several of Lily's crew became sick with an unfortunate case of food poisoning barely thirty-six hours before the event, she discovered Mara knew her way around weddings. Within a year she'd become an assistant in the Manhattan office. A few years after that she was running this branch in Poughkeepsie.

Lily didn't bother texting a reply, but instead depressed the speed dial. The first ring had barely ended before the call connected.

"I thought that inquiry was on top of the queue for the next proposal review," Mara said.

Lily sighed. "It was. Now it's a go."

"Um, yeah. Got that part. Ginger's been talking about the wedding nonstop. She seems to think you've already agreed, and I didn't have the heart to break it to her. The part I don't get is why I had to read that you'd accepted the job online."

Lily usually awoke with a clear head. Whether she was a morning person or because she lived in a constant state of semianxiety, she wasn't sure, but this morning she must not have been thinking as clearly as usual. "What are you talking about? I simply...well, not agreed per se, but sort of got maneuvered and guilted into saying yes."

"Lily, what are you doing? You need a vacation."

"It'll have to wait."

"Even so, how on earth can you possibly squeeze in another event?"

"We'll manage."

"This is not doable. You've got a lot on your plate right now. We're forty-eight hours out in Brussels. Three weeks in Los Angeles. Six in Geneva and Aruba." Mara paused to exhale an exasperated breath. "You've got four more events in production right behind those and that lineup doesn't include my office, which you well know operates like the redheaded stepchild."

A rather witty comment as Mara was a tried-and-true redhead—freckles and all. But the pressure Lily suddenly felt precluded humor.

"I know. And I refused. Everyone ganged up on me. It would have taken the Jets' defensive line to stop them." The muscle under her left eye twitched. "But what do you mean you read about it on the internet? Where?"

"The All About Angel blog."

How could a day go south so fast? "You. Are. Kidding. Me."

"Not kidding. Log on and read it for yourself if you must, but that would be an unpleasant way to start the morning. And you've got unpleasantries that takes precedence, I'm afraid. There are some unhappy media outlets at the moment. You promised an exclusive. I followed up last night by assuring they'd get one."

"Oh, no."

"Oh, yes. Several have already read the bogus blogger and word's getting around fast, apparently. My inbox was practically smoking when I logged on this morning."

Lily rubbed at the twitching muscle. "Let me check something and call you back."

She had no clue what Max's typical morning schedule might look like beyond knowing he had to get Madeleine off to school. If it was a little early for him...well, he could lose some sleep. She certainly would because of this big wedding he'd dropped in her lap.

Scrolling through the contacts on her phone, she found his number.

He answered quickly. "Lily Susan." His voice soft and gravelly, a morning voice.

"Good morning, Max. I've got a question for you."

"Shoot."

"After you left here, did you speak with your mother last night about your brother-in-law's wedding?"

“No. I didn’t actually see her last night. She and my father had some sort of engagement that kept them out late. How come?”

Lily frowned. That wasn’t what she’d expected at all. But she couldn’t imagine why he’d lie when he’d been so blunt with his opinions.

The prodigal, indeed.

“The All About Angel blogger somehow knows I’ve confirmed for your wedding.”

“You thought I jumped on the exclusive?” He sounded offended.

“That seemed the most likely way for the news to get out. I mean, your mother thought I’d already agreed. I wonder where she could have gotten that idea?”

The cad didn’t even bother defending himself. “Did you agree?”

She wanted to say no, simply because he was irking her. “I agreed.”

“I thank you, then.” That voice rippled through all her still-sleepy places without permission. “I know you wanted to relax on this trip, and you will. Like your mom said yesterday, you’ll have help. You have my word that I’ll pitch in any way I can.”

“Oh, you will, and I’ll need help. Lots and lots of it. Be forewarned.”

“Not a problem.” There was a chuckle in there. “And for the record, I would not jump on an exclusive, even if I had spoken with my mother last night. But I didn’t know you’d agreed. I can prove it—”

“You don’t have to prove anything, Max. I don’t think you’re a liar for the record. Merely pushy. And I can’t figure out what’s going on. Two days in a row, I’ve got personal information going public without my knowledge or consent.”

“That is disturbing. Any ideas?”

“No clue. I didn’t tell anyone.” Because she was still in denial over being outmaneuvered so handily. She’d wanted to savor the first night of her vacation in peace. “My assistant in Manhattan doesn’t have a clue. The last he heard, we’d put the inquiry on top of the pile for the next review meeting. And I didn’t even talk to my office manager here after I confirmed with your mother.”

“Could the blogger be speculating? You’ve said yourself that their information isn’t accurate.”

“But how would the blogger even know about the wedding? Unless he or she was at the airport yesterday when you announced— Damn it.” She practically growled. “It’s in the news. The press might not know whether or not I was planning the wedding, but they knew I was considering it.”

There was silence for so long that suddenly Lily knew without a shred of doubt where she’d find the first headline.

“You didn’t.” Not a question.

“Well, it is news.” He didn’t sound in the least bit repentant. “Big news.”

“Max, you knew I was trying to lay low—”

“Excuse me, got to run. I hear Madeleine.”

Before the call disconnected, she could hear his throaty laughter.

Argh!

Her feet hit the floor and slid right into the slippers perched beside the bed. She snatched her robe off the poster and thrust her arms into the sleeves while heading out the door. With the bulk of her life spent traveling, her wardrobe was public ready. Hotels. Rentals. Recreational vehicles. Whatever. She’d long ago established routines to make temporary housing comfortable, which meant being always prepared to meet people.

The shadowy house in the quiet predawn felt vaguely familiar as she descended the stairs with the phone cradled against her ear. Another lifetime. She bypassed the front door because the telltale clinking of china let her know someone was awake. She found her dad at the kitchen table.

No surprises here. He’d always been an early riser, preferring a leisurely awakening over coffee and the newspaper before heading to the hardware store. Her mother had probably set up the coffeepot

last night before she went to bed, so the brew would be ready by the time he'd gotten the paper from the yard and settled at the table. A once-familiar routine.

"You made the front page," he informed her without glancing away from the sports section.

How he knew it was her was another question. Lily had long ago accepted Dad had a sixth sense when it came to his kids. Her and Mike, anyway. They were later-in-life blessings, as her mother always called them, which meant her dad had gotten a head start with parenting her siblings. He'd been tough to put one over on.

"I knew it," she said when he handed her a section of the paper. Only in Pleasant Valley would I be front page news. In the civilized world, I'm relegated to local and society pages, and that's fine by me.

She reassembled the mess her dad had made of the newspaper enough to find the front page. The headline read:

Extreme Romance Hits Hudson Valley

She scanned the article. Title aside, which made Worldwide Weddings Unlimited sound like the worst sort of reality show, the piece was well-written and slanted to stake claim to her success. Max had provided the details of her arrival and established her roots in the area from her birth at St. Francis Hospital through graduation from Vassar College. He plugged the hardware store, too.

But his account of the Carmichael/Girard wedding was factual—currently under inquiry. And while he detailed his brother-in-law's intention to campaign for governor, Max was very clear on the fact the wedding hadn't been contracted yet.

She couldn't fault him anywhere.

And she wanted to, so badly.

Why was he under her skin so completely? Because he was bullying her? Must be. Tossing the section on her dad's pile, she headed toward the coffeepot while dialing Mara again.

"I had a thought," Mara said. "Could the blogger be monitoring the wire services? If so, he or she might have read what happened when you got off the plane yesterday."

"That was my thought. We need to see what time the entry posted." Grabbing a mug from the drain board, she poured coffee then headed to the enclosed porch so she could talk without disturbing her dad.

"You know what bothers me, Mara? The way the legit media is monitoring that nobody blog. That's worrisome."

"Agreed, but don't be too surprised. It's dog-eat-dog out there. Print media is fighting to survive in the digital age. They're monitoring everything to get a jump on everyone else."

"Tabloid reporters, maybe."

A chuckle on the other end. "You wish. If you didn't want to risk a leak, then you should have kept your arrival quiet like you said you were going to."

"I did."

There was a beat of silence. "Oh, my apologies. I assumed you changed your mind and didn't see fit to notify me."

Lily was already tired of assumptions and the sun wasn't even up yet. "Why would you think that? If I didn't tell you, how would you keep me organized on this trip?"

"Like you need my help with that. You're a machine, and you know it. I'm just making it possible for you to take on more work than humanly possible when you're already superhumanly tired." Mara gave a short laugh. "Any clue who sprung the leak? You told everyone to keep their mouths shut. I can't imagine anyone deliberately... Max didn't say anything, did he? Is this a strong-arm tactic?"

"I thought so at first, too, but he received an email about my arrival. I don't think he'd lie."

"This has gone beyond the mere celebrity stalker with nothing better to do than rant online," Mara said. "I'm getting a sense this blogger has a bitch to square with you. What about your ex? Or his new girlfriend?"

“I can’t imagine he’d stoop that low.” At least, she hoped not. Could she honestly have missed that the man was that depraved? “And Lucas doesn’t have a new girlfriend from what I understand. He dropped the fling as soon as he found out she was the one to give the story to the press. He doesn’t want the bad publicity any more than I do. His company has taken an even worse hit. So what possible bitch could the ex-fling have to square with me? I’m not the morally bankrupt gold digger, remember?”

“You make her look bad.”

“I didn’t say one word.” Lily rested her forehead against the chilled glass. “All I’ve said is no comment.”

“Of course. You’ve been brilliant. That’s why she looks so bad. Try to come at it from her point of view. She makes a bid for the big leagues by getting involved with your fiancé. She tips off the paparazzi, so they’re caught and she’s suddenly all over the news. You dump the jerk and call off the wedding. The jerk freaks with the media explosion and dumps the fling. The whole situation is Emmelina in reverse. Look at what that fiasco has done for Drew Hatcher’s ex-wife. She jumped from television to movies and landed a fifteen-million-dollar deal.”

Just what Lily wanted to do—go from the media’s favorite wedding planner to their favorite victim. “Shoot. Me. Now.”

“Oh, come on, now. If Martha can weather jail, you can weather a breakup and some bad press.” Mara was nothing if not pragmatic. “Now what do you want me to do about the exclusive?”

“Give it to them. Tell them not to put so much stock in worthless internet speculation.” She heaved a sigh. “Tell them I reviewed the inquiry last night. It’s official if they want to go to print. I’ll be hammering out the details today and will make them available by their first deadline. If they break the news online, all I can tell them now is the function will be at Overlook around Thanksgiving and will launch Raymond Girard’s political career. Max’s article will prove I didn’t give the jump to anyone.”

She might have to thank him instead of blame him for keeping her in the news. The front page? Honestly.

“Got it,” Mara said. “When will you get the details to me?”

“As soon as I track down Max.” Which meant she wouldn’t be doing much work on Riley’s wedding today. Wonderful. And she had a grand total of three and a half weeks to plan that one.

Lily sipped her coffee and stared as the sunrise slowly lit the swing and the trees. How did she wind up back here again?

“How in the world am I going to pull this off?” A rhetorical question that echoed dully in the predawn quiet. “I’m going to need a miracle.”

“You’re the angel. I don’t think a miracle will be a problem.”

Lily found herself smiling. “I’ll be by later so I can start delegating. Will you be around? What do you have on your plate with the Eversham/Raichle event today?”

“I’m in the office, so come at your convenience.”

“Great. See you then.” Lily disconnected then set the cup on the windowsill. With the smile still on her face, she tweeted:

I don’t believe in luck. I believe in blessings, common sense, a strong work ethic and surrounding myself with wonderful, competent people—my life is filled with them.

That was as much of a rebuttal as her followers would get today, and Mara would know how much she was appreciated.

CHAPTER SEVEN

MAX SQUINTED at the computer monitor. Leaning in closer to the display, he scanned the dummy Riley had sent detailing the proposed layout of copy and photos for tomorrow's edition. Of course it was still early in the day yet, so the layout was bound to change as reporters returned from the field and news broke over the wire services. But Riley was never one to save things until the last minute, and that lent a level of calm to the newsroom that Max enjoyed a great deal.

Promoting her to managing editor had been a smart move, as he'd known it would be. They'd been friends since Riley had interned at the Herald as an undergrad at Vassar. He knew her work. Knew the friend she was. Life had dealt both of them hard blows with death and grief, and that had made their friendship even stronger.

He'd met resistance from his family over Riley's lack of actual experience, of course, but she knew her way around the newsroom and Max knew Riley. She learned on her feet and was the best person for the job.

He'd won that skirmish. Largely because his grandfather had supported the decision. He may have retired from the Herald, but he hadn't stepped down from his role of family patriarch yet.

An electronic screech cut through the quiet, and Max reached for the intercom. He didn't get a chance to say a word before his assistant's voice said, "Code 125."

His mother swept into his office the way she always did—as if she owned the place. She did, so her refusal to knock wasn't personal. And she wasn't the only one with that sense of entitlement, either. Various Downey family members could be counted on to show up unannounced at any time of the day or night, which was a job hazard of working in any of the family businesses. His clever assistant had come up with a series of codes to give Max a heads-up on who was about to barge into his office.

"What a nice surprise, Mom. What brings you by today?" he asked, although he suspected he already knew the answer.

She was carrying a copy of today's edition.

"Hello, Maxim." She didn't say another word. Dropping her purse into a chair, she cocked a hip against his desk and peered down at him.

His mother had always been an attractive woman. Quite beautiful even with the black hair and green eyes she'd passed along to him. She was tall and willowy with the benefit of a fleet of capable cosmetic surgeons who kept age at bay. Not that she was elderly by any stretch. She hadn't yet reached her mid-sixties and wore that stylish, timeless aura privilege and breeding could buy.

He waited while she shook open the paper to display the headline above the fold.

Extreme Romance Hits Hudson Valley

"Catchy headline. Bet there isn't a paper left in a box anywhere in this town." She smiled, clearly pleased. "Here's hoping."

"You did a fine job with the article, Maxim. Informative and tasteful."

"I'm glad you approve."

Mission accomplished, then. He'd known when he'd written the piece a lot of folks would be paying close attention. His mother included, as it concerned her favorite pet project.

Worldwide Weddings Unlimited.

"I do." She set down the paper. "And that's why I'm here. Now that Lily's in town, we need to make some decisions regarding Raymond's wedding. I'm on my way into the office to meet with her. I thought you might want to weigh in."

Very nice of her to consider him since he was, of course, hosting the event. But here was something else Max knew wasn't personal. Any event involving Overlook and Worldwide Weddings Unlimited would create a pot his mother simply wouldn't be able to resist stirring. Overlook was her

home, too, and as the reigning matriarch, all things social were her exclusive domain. That unspoken rule had been set in stone for more generations than Max had been around.

But he sometimes thought they'd all be better off if they put his mother to work at any one of their business interests since his mother's charitable endeavors and social calendar obviously weren't fulfilling her. She was a smart woman. Unfortunately, he couldn't see her catering to VIP clients at the bank. Dictating more described her personal style.

"Raymond and Jamilyn have given me a general idea of what they're looking for," he said. "Shouldn't be too hard to figure things out. They'll be calling whenever they're able, and they're both accessible by email when they can't make a phone call."

"Maxim, that's all well and good, but this is going to be a grand affair. Raymond's future career is on the line here, and you've already given the media a heads-up. Add Lily's involvement and this wedding simply must live up to its press. I'm afraid the planning won't be quite as simple as you're making it out to be."

"So I've heard." From a very beautiful wedding planner in no uncertain terms.

She leaned forward and patted his cheek, her fond smile making him brace himself before she uttered her next words. "Leave everything to me. Lily's here and we've got Mara and the office at our disposal. We'll run everything by you if you're worried. We all know how busy you are."

"I'm not worried, Mother." A lie if ever there was one, but here was a place where all of Lily Susan's arguments came in handy. "I don't want us to get ahead of ourselves, though. Lily Susan only heard about the wedding the day before yesterday. She has another wedding to plan first."

His mother waved him off with an impeccably manicured hand. "She can plan more than one wedding at a time. That's her job."

Given Lily Susan's history, the assumption was a reasonable one. But his mother didn't know how exhausted Lily Susan was, although saying so might violate what she'd told him in confidence. "I'm only pointing out that we've sprung this on her, and it won't serve anyone's purpose if we don't give her a chance to figure out her own schedule."

His mother frowned. "She needs to move on this. There's isn't much time."

"Give her some room, please."

"Honestly, Maxim. I gave the girl her start in business, and she's still my partner. We enjoy working together. It's going to be fun."

Fun? The only fun that Max could see in the entire equation was the time he could spend with Lily Susan. But he'd barely admitted that to himself—and certainly wasn't ready to say a word to his mother.

Lily Susan intrigued him more than he'd expected. Her cool, polished exterior contrasted with the warmth she'd shown with his daughter. And the challenge in her eyes fascinated him. Especially her strength and the vulnerability he sensed she was hiding. Oh, yeah, the woman fascinated him.

He was having life signs where he'd least expected them. Figured that he'd start to emerge from his shell for a woman who in no way meshed with any aspect of his life.

Max leaned back in his chair and considered his reply. He needed to redirect before his mother thought she had permission to assume control. His mother understood money.

"Please keep in mind that while I—" emphasis on the singular "—may be hosting this event, Raymond and Jamilyn are paying for it, so I'm accountable for every dime. I have no choice but to be involved with the decision making otherwise I won't be able to adhere to their budget."

Rising quickly, he kissed her cheek. "But I do appreciate your connections and your help. You know that."

Her expression said she recognized the dismissal for exactly what it was. There was nothing left to say as far as Max was concerned. Of course, he didn't think for one second his mother would back off of the planning even if she didn't have *carte blanche* to assume control.

“Kiss Madeleine for me.” She sounded cool as she retrieved her purse and copy of the paper. “Please let her know we’re scheduled at the spa Friday afternoon for our nails. Brigham will pick her up after school.”

“I’ll tell her.”

She didn’t say another word as she strode out the door, unhappy. Max rubbed his temples, determined to come up with the next move before he had a train wreck on his hands.

But at least his mother hadn’t taken out her displeasure on his daughter. That was definitely something. Madeleine always enjoyed outings with Goddess, usually involving grooming or shopping expeditions. His mother wasn’t exactly an involved grandparent—nothing along the lines of the hands-on Rosie—but as his daughter and mother were both female and kindred souls in a family with a lot of men, he encouraged his mother whenever she reached out.

Max didn’t want to strain their relationship, either, but he refused to allow his mother to ruin his plans. He had to tread carefully because Lily Susan was comfortable working with his mother.

He had no intention of stepping aside. His mother and Lily Susan had no choice but to deal with him.

CHAPTER EIGHT

LILY DROVE DOWN Main Street with the noon traffic in her dad's Cadillac, which she'd commandeered as her own until arranging for a rental. Downtown Poughkeepsie had come a long way since the days when she and her friends used to sneak into town to hang out at the Main Mall and ogle boys. The pedestrian mall had been built to preserve the nineteenth-century commercial buildings that lined the town's main street. While it had been a noble endeavor, the inception of suburban shopping centers had degenerated Main Mall into a seamy place that had fascinated teens from the rural hamlet of Pleasant Valley.

Main Mall had met its official demise only a few years before Lily's last visit home. The street had since been reopened and all those commercial buildings were now on the historic register.

Her own building had undergone a similar transformation, and as she turned onto a side street and found a parking space, she remembered how this row of Victorian town houses hadn't looked nearly so well-preserved a decade ago. But to the twenty-year-old college student with very big dreams, the three-story town house, with its mansard roof and dormer windows, had been the epitome of worldliness and charm.

As the property had needed considerable work and everyone had believed the demise of the Main Mall inevitable, she'd purchased it for a song. Then, with the help of her father, brothers and friends, she'd undertaken the renovations of the interior and exterior herself.

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