

*Weddings* BY *Bella*

BOOK THREE

# IT HAD *to* BE YOU

A NOVEL

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# 1

## You Make Me Feel So Young

If Aunt Rosa and Uncle Lazarro hadn't wasted sixteen years bickering over who was the better singer—Frank Sinatra or Dean Martin—they probably would have ended up married years ago . . . and I would never have found myself trying to factor a mob boss into the wedding party. Still, I've learned not to question God's timing, particularly in matters of the heart. So what if the sixtysomething lovebirds waited until their golden years to confess their undying love for each other? The blissful couple still had plenty of days ahead to make up for lost time. And I made it my goal to give them the best possible chance at happiness by coordinating a wedding they wouldn't soon forget, even if it did include a few questionable characters from their past.

Laz and Rosa's desire for a forties-themed reception came as no surprise. They were both born during the swing era, after all. But their plan to transform our family's Galveston Island wedding facility into a big band wonderland would

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take some work . . . and lots of it. With only six weeks till the mid-December extravaganza, I had my hands full. Hiring a band, designing the room, helping Rosa pick out her gown and forties-themed bridesmaids' dresses. Whew! And all while planning my own wedding to D.J. Neeley, the hunkiest cowboy on the island. How could I possibly handle it all?

Ah yes, with the Lord's help. He alone would see me through this. And I might even have a little fun along the way.

I met with the happy couple on a Tuesday afternoon in late October to talk things through. We didn't have to go far to meet. After all, our family-run wedding facility was just next door to the Rossi home on Broadway, near the heart of the island.

Rosa, my mother's older sister, grinned like a Cheshire cat as she settled into her seat on the opposite side of my desk. Rosa had never been the sort to pay much attention to her hair or makeup, and her simple dresses—which were usually hidden behind a tomato-stained apron—weren't exactly couture. The sagging knee-highs were a bit of a distraction at times, as were the orthopedic shoes. Oh, but as she sat across from me now, a blushing bride-to-be, the joy of the Lord radiated from her smile and her eyes. In that moment I thought her the most beautiful bride I'd ever seen. I could hardly wait to see her walk down the aisle in her white wedding gown.

My gaze shifted to Lazarro, my father's older brother. Laz had always been the cocky, sophisticated sort with a somewhat brusque demeanor. These days, however, he was a changed man, a happier version of his old self. That's what love would do to you. This I knew from firsthand experience, having finally met the man of my dreams. Like Uncle Laz, I had been transformed.

Rosa glanced at the clock on the wall, her eyes narrowing.

“We can’t stay long, Bella. Laz and I have already started dinner. We’ll need to get back to the house by 5:30.”

“No problem. I’ll have you out of here in plenty of time.” I leaned back in my chair, my gaze shifting between my aunt and uncle. “So, let’s start with you. What’s up? You two said you had something special to tell me. I’m dying to know.”

“Bella, the most wonderful thing has happened.” Rosa looked at Uncle Lazarro, then back at me. She clasped her hands together and grinned. “Laz has found the *perfect* swing band for our reception.”

“Oh?” This news surprised me, particularly in light of the fact that I’d been looking for a band for over a week now and hadn’t been able to locate one yet. Apparently, there was a run on swing bands during the Christmas season. Most were booked well into the New Year. How my uncle had accomplished this feat was nothing short of a miracle.

Laz leaned forward, and I could read the excitement in his eyes. “These guys are based out of Houston. They’re called Band of Gold. Want to guess why?”

“Um, they have matching gold jackets?”

“Nope.”

“Gold teeth?” I tried.

“No.” Laz laughed. “I’ll put you out of your misery. They’re all in their golden years. The youngest guy in the group is sixty-seven. The oldest is eighty-four.”

“Whoa.” I swallowed hard, curious as to how this would work. “Laz, have you heard their music? How do you know they’re any good?”

“I went to their website this morning,” he said with a wave of his hand. “Heard samples of their stuff. They’re amazing. And they know all of the best swing music—Glenn Miller, Benny Goodman, Tommy Dorsey, Cab Calloway, Kay Kyser,

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Count Basie, Paul Whiteman, Artie Shaw.” He went off on a tangent, listing bands I’d never even heard of. Apparently Band of Gold knew them all and played their tunes to perfection, at least according to Laz.

“They even feature a few Rosemary Clooney songs,” Rosa threw in when Laz paused for breath. “You know how much I love her music.” She began to list Rosemary’s top ten songs, her eyes wide with excitement. Then she began to sing “Come On-a My House” in perfect pitch. Hmm. Maybe we could get Rosa to sing a number at her own reception. Something to think about.

My aunt finally stopped singing and flashed a girlish smile. “Great music sets the tone for a wonderful event, and we want the best.” As she began to explain her passion for music, her language shifted to Italian. I had to smile. She often did this when excited, though she rarely realized it.

“Well, speaking of the best music around, what about Sinatra and Dino?” I asked the question hesitantly, predicting the answer before it was spoken. For years, Rosa had listened to nothing but Ol’ Blue Eyes. And my uncle’s addiction to Dean Martin had spilled over to his restaurant, Parma John’s, where the daily pizza specials were named after some of Dino’s most famous songs. The Mambo Italiano was still my favorite, but the Simpatico came in a close second. Just thinking about that pepperoni made my mouth water, even now.

Rosa shook her head at my question. “We’ve declared a truce.”

“And in honor of that truce, there will be no Dean Martin tunes played at our wedding,” Laz said with a nod. “I’ve had my fill of him.”

“Or Frank Sinatra tunes,” Rosa was quick to add. “I’m sick to death of Ol’ Blue Eyes, if you want the truth of it.”

“Gotcha.” I knew they’d put their quarreling to rest, but secretly hoped they’d work in at least a few Sinatra/Martin tunes. The rest of the Rossi clan still loved the dynamic duo, even if Rosa and Laz had given up on them. “Well, tell me more about your new band, and I’ll get them booked right away.” Reaching for a pen and paper, I scribbled down the information Uncle Laz gave. Turned out the bandleader was a fellow named Gordy. I made a mental note to call him as soon as our little meeting ended.

“Will you still need a deejay?” I asked.

“Of course.” Rosa nodded. “Someone has to run this show.”

“D.J. or Armando?” I listed my fiancé first, hoping they would pick him instead of my impulsive middle brother. Thankfully, Rosa played along.

“I’d say D.J. He’s got that nice bass voice that all the women love. It’s like velvet.”

“I’m not so sure about that,” Uncle Lazarro said. “Armando knows the soundboard. And he’s familiar with big band music. He might be the better choice this time around.”

“Sounds like a compromise is in order,” I said. “Armando can run the sound, and D.J. can schmooze the crowd with his silky voice. Agreed?”

“Agreed,” Rosa said with a nod.

Uncle Laz leaned over and gave my aunt a gentle kiss on the lips. She turned several shades of red. I diverted my attention by reaching for my bottle of water and taking a swig.

“That’s one of the things I love most about you, Rosa,” Laz whispered. “Always ready to compromise. And so even-tempered.”

The water almost came shooting out of my nose at that point. I’d heard Laz call Aunt Rosa a great many things over

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the years. They had, after all, been archenemies. But, even-tempered? Never had those words been used to describe her. Stifling a chuckle, I tried to imagine my volatile aunt as even-tempered.

*Time to get this train back on track, Bella.* I did my best to keep them focused on the matter at hand—their wedding. Scribbling the information down, I said, “It’s settled then. D.J. and Armando will work together. And now, about the caterers . . .”

Laz put his hand up in the air. “You know me better than that, Bella. I couldn’t possibly hire a caterer at my own wedding.”

“I would never dream of it either,” Rosa said, crossing her arms at her chest. “I will cook.”

“So will I.” Laz nodded.

“But how?” I asked. “I know you two are the best cooks on the island, but catering your own wedding? You’ll be exhausted. It’s too much to expect.” I turned to Rosa. “Can’t you see the dilemma? You’ll be worn out by the time you get into your dress.” *And you’ll probably end up with tomato sauce all over the front of it.*

“Of course it’s not too much to expect,” Rosa exclaimed. “I cook every day of my life. I can certainly cook for my own wedding.” As my eyes narrowed, she quickly added, “But don’t you worry, Bella. I’ll start preparing the food days ahead of time. There won’t be much to do on the final day, anyway. Just getting it warmed up and onto the tables is all, really.”

“Besides, Jenna and Bubba will be there to help,” Laz said with a wave of his hand.

I nodded, realizing that my best friend and her boyfriend would do all they could to make the day easier on Rosa and Laz. Not that I’d seen much of Jenna lately. Now that we



were both in love—she with the younger Neeley brother and I with the older—we barely saw each other any more. I'd have to remedy that, and soon.

Laz's voice jolted me back to the present. "We will have the best Italian food our friends and family have ever seen!" He and Rosa dove into a lengthy chat about the various food items, and I wrote everything down, just in case they forgot.

When Laz finally paused, I had one more question for him. "Have you two settled on your honeymoon spot yet?"

"Have we!" He grinned ear to ear.

"Why, I'm surprised you didn't figure it out, Bella," Rosa said with a smile. "It's so obvious. We're going to—"

"Napoli!" Laz joined her in shouting.

"We're going back to our roots, Bella Bambina," Rosa said with tears in her eyes. "To Naples. Do you know how many years it's been since I've seen my homeland?"

"Seven? Eight?" I said.

"Nine and a half." She dabbed at her eyes. "I miss the Italian countryside so much." She smiled. "And we've come up with the perfect plan. Did your mama tell you that our middle sisters are coming from Italy for the wedding?"

"Yes, she's thrilled."

"So am I." Rosa's eyes brimmed over. "Bertina and Bianca will stand up for me, along with your mother, of course."

"That's what Mama said. I'm so excited for you." If anyone deserved to see her family on her wedding day, it was Aunt Rosa. She'd left so many friends and loved ones behind all those years ago when she came to live with us in the States.

"My brother is coming from Italy as well." Laz nodded. "Haven't seen Emilio in ages."

"We're all flying back together," Rosa explained. "It will

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be a party all the way from Houston to Rome. I can hardly wait!”

I wanted to ask how they could possibly have time to themselves on their honeymoon with this plan in motion, but didn't. Frankly, every time I thought about my elderly aunt and uncle having a honeymoon, I felt a little squeamish. There were just some things a girl didn't need to know.

One thing I knew for sure, though. As I stared at the look of love pouring out of my aunt's eyes, and when I watched the tender way Uncle Laz spoke to her, I realized they both completed each other. Oh, and if the Lord could do that for two people who had once despised one another, what wonderful things lay ahead for a couple who had gotten off to a really great start—say, a bumbling wedding planner and the sweetest cowboy in the state of Texas?

Mmm! Suddenly, I could hardly wait to see D.J.