

Tempting Mr. Callahan

Bonus chapter

Josie

Eight months later, I stood on the beach, surrounded by loved ones, new and old. The salt ocean air carried every version of my past with it—salted fries on the boardwalk, the clink of silverware at our family’s old restaurant, the first time Dante kissed me on the beach. Now it was the backdrop to something even more permanent.

Our wedding.

An archway of driftwood and wildflowers stood right on the sand in Asbury Park. The Atlantic shimmered behind us like it was clapping, celebrating. It wasn’t a traditional ceremony, but nothing about our story had been. It was better. Ours.

My dress was made from vintage ivory lace, with a fitted bodice and a sweetheart neckline. Tiny satin-covered buttons trailed down the back, and the cinched waist gave way to a flowing A-line skirt that moved like a sigh with every step. My mom had cried when I first tried it on. So had I.

Enzo trotted down the aisle first, a little too proud in his black bow tie, the rings tied carefully to the custom harness on his back. He paused halfway, let out a huff of judgment at the crowd, then continued with dignified disdain like he was the one getting married.

Rose, Dante's niece, followed in a soft pink dress with petals flying from her basket like confetti. A tiny whirlwind of joy. Margo, my maid of honor, was already tearing up beside me. She'd given me a huge hug before walking down the aisle ahead of me.

When I stepped onto the aisle, Aiden holding my arm, I wasn't nervous. I was full. Brimming. Like my whole body might spill over from the weight of joy.

“You ready?” Aiden whispered.

“I’ve never been more.”

He looked down at me, eyes glossy with pride, and led me toward my future.

And Dante.

He stood at the altar, holding our five-month-old daughter, Hope, like she was an extension of his soul. She was in a tiny ivory dress, dark hair and wild like her dad’s, with a crown of baby’s breath on her head. She let out a soft coo when she saw me, and Dante—God—his whole face changed.

Like he’d just caught his breath after months underwater.

Dante didn’t often wear suits anymore, because Dad-duty and ‘dry-clean only’ didn’t mix well. Today, though, he was in all his splendor, a deep charcoal three-piece suit with a subtle herringbone weave and an old-world elegance. His waistcoat was a soft dove gray, fastened with antique brass buttons, and his crisp white shirt was accented by a deep red silk tie that matched the garnets in my engagement

ring. He didn't gel back his hair anymore, letting his waves fly free.

Theo stood next to him as best man, sharp in black, hands folded in front of him like a man who planned entire empires in his sleep. Gio was beside him, sunglasses still on, a smirk on his lips as he watched the scene unfold with reluctant amusement. Silas stood just behind them—stoic, controlled, but I caught the ghost of a smile when the baby tried to chew on Dante's lapel. And Griffin? He had a GoPro strapped to his chest and whispered commentary under his breath like he was directing the whole event for his next streaming doc.

None of them believed in love. Not really. But they showed up—for Dante. And maybe, for the possibility that love could be real after all.

My mom was in the front row, tears spilling freely. Her new husband had his arm around her shoulders, their fingers intertwined like teenage sweethearts. Next to her, Iris was

staring at her brother with so much pride. Rose hopped up into her lap, her job as a flower girl done, and snuggled into her mom's embrace. The second row was reserved for Vicky, my sister-in-law, and her two girls, Christie and Georgina, who had reminded me so often of my dearest wish. Their faces were also beaming with joy. Margo blew me a kiss. Theo nodded to me solemnly, for once without a snide remark. And Enzo, as if sensing the moment's gravity, sat proudly at attention beside the arch.

And then Dante handed hope to Margo and took my hands.

His were warm. Steady.

I didn't hear anything else. Not the waves. Not the wind. Just his voice, low and breaking, when he said,

"Fifi," he said, making me let out a choked-up laugh. I didn't mind when he called me that anymore; he'd earned the right. But I saw through his attempt at humor, right through to the way his breath hitched as he tried to keep it together.

“You were the one thing I didn’t plan for. The one variable I never accounted for—because I didn’t think someone like you existed. You see everything. You remember everything. You’ve carried the weight of my world, quietly and without asking for anything in return, for years. But I see you now. All of you.”

He swallowed, voice tightening.

“You are the sharpest mind I’ve ever known. The fiercest heart. The truest home. And loving you is not something I choose just today—it’s something I’ll choose every day, for the rest of my life. No defenses. No distance. Just us.”

He leaned in slightly, voice low and reverent.

“I used to think power was in control. Now I know it’s in surrender. And I surrender everything I am, everything I have, to you.”

I smiled, even though my hands were trembling in his. He slid the wedding band onto

my finger, a white gold to match my engagement ring, with an inscription just for us.

Choosing love every day.

Then it was my turn.

“I used to think love meant disappearing,” I said. “Staying quiet so someone else could shine. I was good at that. I learned how to be invisible, to make everything easier for everyone else. But you, Dante, you never let me stay hidden. Even when you didn’t realize it, you were calling me forward. Every time you trusted me, every time you looked at me like I was the only one who understood...the truth is, I fell for you long before you ever saw me.”

I paused, because his eyes were glassy now, and I needed to breathe through the weight of what I’d carried.

“You are impossible. Brilliant. Maddening. And worth every single moment of waiting. I loved you when it wasn’t returned. I loved you when it hurt. And now I get to love you with nothing held back, with so much joy it makes my heart feel like it’s going to burst.”

I squeezed his hands, steady now.

“You don’t have to carry everything alone anymore. I’m here. Not behind you, in your shadow, but beside you. And wherever you go, whatever we build, my heart is yours. Always.”

We kissed under the flowers and the sun, our baby squealing next to us, Enzo wagging his tail.

And for the first time in my life, I wasn’t wishing for more.

I had it.

The man I loved. Our daughter. A future I helped build. And the kind of family I’d yearned for but never thought I’d get.

The reception was set up in the courtyard behind what used to be our family’s restaurant. It was now a sun-drenched garden strung with garlands and long tables layered with wildflowers and ivy. We’d been restoring the space and were going to turn it into a community center with a focus on supporting

bereaved families, but tonight, it was ours. Just ours. And full of laughter and joy.

The music was soft and jazzy, people swayed and laughed under the late spring sky, and I couldn't stop staring at the life I never thought I'd get to keep.

Dante was holding our daughter again, gently bouncing her while she gnawed determinedly on the corner of his tie. His suit was rumpled, his waves a little messy from the wind, but he looked so happy. At ease. Like this version of him had been waiting all along to come out.

"You look like a man who's been completely tamed," Theo said, appearing at Dante's side with a drink in one hand.

Dante arched a brow. "Tamed? I prefer evolved."

Gio chuckled as he passed, wine glass in hand. "Nah, man. You've been domesticated. You're like... a golden retriever now."

“An extremely handsome, powerful retriever,” I offered as I stepped in to kiss Dante’s cheek.

Theo raised his glass in a lazy toast. “To Dante. Former apex predator. Now proudly owned by a beautiful woman far out of his league and a baby with zero respect for personal boundaries.”

We often joked about the time Theo had flirted with me in Seattle. Dante didn’t get jealous anymore. He knew I was his.

“She’s five months old, Theo,” I said, smirking. “She only knows food and sleep.”

The baby squealed, reaching for Theo, who visibly panicked and took a step back like she might explode on contact.

“I’m good,” he muttered.

Dante gave him a long look, something knowing behind it. “It’ll happen to you too, you know.”

“Highly unlikely.”

Dante just smiled. “You’ll meet someone who knocks your entire world sideways. And

when you do...none of this will feel like losing. It'll feel like coming home."

Theo's jaw tensed. For a second, something flickered in his eyes—something raw. Something I recognized from the earliest days of Dante and me, back when we couldn't say what we wanted out loud.

But before I could ask, he tipped back his drink, nodded at Dante, and walked off like he hadn't just cracked the door open on something complicated and aching.

Dante watched him go, then turned to me with a soft laugh. "That man is going to need a crash course in not ruining his own life."

I wrapped my arms around his waist, careful not to jostle the baby. "He's got a decent teacher."

We stood like that for a while. Just the three of us under the lights, the hum of our people around us, the slow sway of a perfect day coming to a close.

Dante looked down at me, then at our daughter.

“You know,” he said softly, “if I could go back and change anything...”

I looked up.

“I wouldn’t,” he said. “Even the worst parts. They led me to you. To this.”

Tears prickled behind my eyes. “We’re really here, huh?”

He kissed my forehead, then the baby’s.

“We’re really here.”

And for once, my heart didn’t race ahead or reach back. It simply stayed right where it was—full, steady, home.