

# Mindy and Raniero's Wedding

by Beth Fantaskey

The day had been warm, like most days on Maui, but that evening, the breeze off the ocean was just the right amount of chilly. That usually happened, too. The little house I was going to share with my new husband didn't even have real windows.

Why bother?

I mentioned that we were going to live in Hawaii, right? At least, most of the year, when Raniero wasn't chasing waves on the competitive surf circuit.

"Are you ready, Mindy?"

I'd been staring out at the ocean, and I turned to find that my best friend, Jessica... er, Queen Antanasia Packwood Vladescu... had joined me on the remote stretch of sand. She looked more nervous than I was. I was strangely calm. I guess I knew that I was doing the right thing.

"Yeah, Jess, I'm ready," I said, using the name I couldn't stop using, because I'd known her since long before she became a vampire princess, married a vampire prince, then went through a coronation and became queen of two, count 'em two, bloodsucking, once rival, clans.

I also started laughing, because I couldn't get used to seeing Jess with a *huge* stomach. My matron of honor – and only attendant – was a curvy girl, to begin with, but the *twins* she was carrying were nearly doubling her in size. At least, it looked that way as she stood there with the wind blowing around the simple, floral, island-inspired dress I'd chosen for her.

"What's wrong?" she asked, frowning and smoothing the dress. "I look like a sailboat, don't I? I'm gigantic, right? And I'm only four months along!"

I stepped closer to her. The sand felt rough and cool under my bare feet. "Honestly, Jess. You can't be worried about your weight now, can you? Lucius loved your curves before you were pregnant. I'm sure he's *very* happy with you now."

Jess blushed. She'd grown kind of pale, since becoming a vampire – my soon-to-be-husband, Raniero Vladescu Lovato, was the only tanned member of the undead that I'd met so far – but her cheeks flushed then. In fact, she pretty much glowed, like expectant mothers were supposed to do.

"Yes, I think Lucius is happy," she agreed.

"You think? You *think* he is happy?" The teasing question, asked in a thick, royal Romanian accent, let us know that King Lucius Vladescu had arrived on the scene, even before

he stepped into the dim light cast by a small bonfire, which would be the heart of the reception. He slipped his arms around his wife and smiled down at her, revealing white, even teeth. “Do I not tell you enough that I am happy? Must you guess at it?”

Jess practically melted against him.

Who wouldn't?

I was marrying the world's other hottest vampire, and I was completely loyal, but there was no denying that, with his black hair and dark eyes, Lucius Vladescu was really handsome.

“I know you're happy,” Jess said, grinning. “I don't really have any doubts.”

Lucius kissed the top of her head. “Good.” Then he looked at me and grew more serious. “Much as I disapprove of some of the attire for this affair – in particular, the groom's *shorts* – I will admit that *you* look beautiful, Melinda Sue.”

“Thanks.” I did a little twirl in my white spaghetti-strap gown, which showed off the tan I'd picked up, too, by following my surfer vampire boyfriend around the globe, at least to all the warm countries. “I hope Raniero likes it.”

“I am certain that he will,” Lucius promised. Then he frowned. “Are you positive that it's not too late to at least wear shoes of some sort? Even the type Raniero favors, which make that irritating slapping sound when he walks through the castle?”

“It's killing you to wear jeans to a wedding, isn't it?” I asked Lucius, who preferred to be “sartorially correct,” as he put it. I was pretty sure Lukey knew more American words than me. “You can't even handle that, can you?”

“I prefer the term ‘destroying,’” Lucius corrected me. “And, yes, I am having difficulty ‘wrapping my head around’ the casual dress code, to use an American phrase that always induces a painful image. Skulls are not made for ‘wrapping around’ things.”

“Yes, and I used to believe that teeth weren't made for changing shape,” Jess reminded him. She twisted in his arms and rose up on her toes, with effort, to kiss his cheek. He had to bend down a little to help her reach. He was all about chivalry. “In two days, you'll be back in our drafty castle, and you can wear boots every day,” she added, her eyes twinkling with amusement. It was great to see how happy she was, too, after all she'd gone through, nearly losing Lucius twice. “I promise you, it will be suitably freezing when we return to Sighisoara. Shoes will not be optional.”

“About that...” Lucius said, looking pretty amused, himself. “I thought perhaps we could stay here for a week or so. It's not good for you to journey all the time, in your condition. You – and my sons – should rest here for awhile.”

Jess didn't bother arguing about the babies' potential gender, which nobody knew yet. Instead, her eyes lit up. I was sure that, like me, she knew Lukey was basically just trying to please her with a vacation from their royal duties, which sometimes included things like staking other vampires. "Really? Are you serious? We can stay?"

He nodded, his dark hair gleaming in the firelight. A hint of a smile that he couldn't quite contain played at the corners of his lips. "Yes. I am serious."

For a guy who used to complain about how all of us from Pennsylvania were commoners, he really liked to fulfill Jess's every whim.

My new husband would be the same way. We wouldn't rule a vampire nation, or live on an "estate," but Raniero definitely treated me like a princess.

"I need to return to my brother's side," Lucius said, removing his arms from around Jess and stepping back. Technically, the two vampires were cousins, but they considered each other brothers. If Lucius hadn't been able to peel himself away from his royal duties to serve as best man, Raniero would've stood alone. But, of course, Lukey and Jess had come for us. "We are ready whenever you are," Lucius added, with the not-so-subtle reminder, "I am sure that you two could talk for hours, but guests await."

"We'll be right there," Jess promised, as Lukey disappeared back into the night, in true vampire fashion. Then she turned to me, and I saw that her eyes were glistening, like she was close to tears.

"Don't do that," I begged. "Or I'll start!"

"Okay," she said, wiping one finger under her eyes. "I'll try not to cry."

I would've blamed her emotions on hormones, but all at once, I was pretty close to breaking down, too. And, although Lucius was right, and Jess I could've talked all night, suddenly we didn't say a word. I was pretty sure we were both reliving all the things we'd gone through together, from meeting in kindergarten to our senior year in high school, when Lucius had arrived, right up to the day he'd stood before a jury, about to be executed, until I'd kind of saved the day. Not to brag, or anything.

"Ready?" Jess asked, taking my hand and squeezing it.

I nodded, because I was really close to crying, right then.

We walked down the beach hand-in-hand, just like we used to walk when we were little kids. I glanced at Jess's stomach. Hopefully, our kids would skip around holding hands, someday.

Were we really about to be honest-to-gosh family?

“Here goes,” Jess whispered, as we arrived at a flower-covered archway Raniero had built for the ceremony.

I’d been focusing on the sand, not wanting to see my groom before I stepped through the arch. And I refused to look up until Jess squeezed my hand, released it, and walked down through the small crowd of friends we’d invited to share our special night.

Then I finally raised my face to see Raniero standing in the sand, at the edge of the ocean that drew him so powerfully and kept him centered, and I got very still inside. It was like I’d found total peace, at the very core of my being.

The vampire I was about to marry might’ve been wearing a pair of shorts, and a t-shirt, and no shoes, but I loved every inch of his six-foot-three self, from his ponytail to his changeable, sea-colored eyes, to his gleaming white teeth, which had changed me...

It was my turn to nearly melt away, or maybe float on air. I couldn’t even feel the sand as I walked toward him. The whole universe seemed to stop around us.

*This is how getting married should feel.*

Raniero smiled as he reached out to take my hand, and he met my eyes, so I could see that he felt the same way. All of the darkness that had been inside of him... It was gone. I knew he would always be a former assassin, but he’d found the peace he’d been seeking. *I’d* helped him, just by loving him.

I clasped his hand and turned so we were side-by-side, facing the ocean, and the sky with a million stars, and forever.