HIS VERY CONVENIENT BRIDE

Sophie Pembroke

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From bridesmaid to bride… Stepping into her sister's place at the altar beside gorgeous tycoon Flynn Ashton, Helena Morrison hopes saying "I do" and uniting their two families will finally be enough to redeem her in her father's eyes. It has nothing to do with the fact that she's always held a special place in her heart for her childhood crush! But after embarking on the perfect Tuscan honeymoon, their paper marriage dissolves to ash as an unexpected heat flares between them… Dare Helena dream that this convenient marriage could be the fresh start they've both been searching for?

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Just a show. That was the key.

Except it wasn't.

Yes, the only reason his first kiss with his wife was taking place in front of a captive audience was to prove a point—to show them that Helena wasn't some sort of poor consolation prize. But that wasn't enough. He had to show Helena that too.

And Helena knew the truth.

If he wanted her to stick with this—to believe they had a real future together—well, that future started right now. With their first kiss.

“Kiss, kiss, kiss, kiss!”

The chanting around them faded into nothing as he leant in closer, closing his eyes as he brushed his lips against hers, soft at first, not wanting to spook her. But then … God, then … Flynn's fingers clutched at her hip, the silk of her dress slipping against his skin as he deepened the kiss.

She tasted like champagne and gold, expensive and sparkling, her mouth warm and willing under his.

He'd wanted to prove a point with this kiss, but for the life of him he couldn't remember what it was.

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Sophie Pembroke

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SOPHIE PEMBROKE has been dreaming, reading and writing romance for years—ever since she first read *The Far Pavilions* under her desk in chemistry class. She later stayed up all night devouring Mills & Boon® books as part of her English degree at Lancaster University, and promptly gave up any pretext of enjoying tragic novels. After all, what's the point of a book without a happy ending?

She loves to set her novels in the places where she has lived—from the wilds of the Welsh mountains to the genteel humour of an English country village or the heat and tension of a London summer. She also has a tendency to make her characters kiss in castles.

Currently Sophie makes her home in Hertfordshire, with her scientist husband (who still shakes his head at the reading-in-chemistry thing) and their four-year-old *Alice in Wonderland-obsessed* daughter. She writes her love stories in the study she begrudgingly shares with her husband, while drinking too much tea and eating homemade cakes. Or, when things are looking very bad for her heroes and heroines, white wine and dark chocolate.

Sophie keeps a blog at www.sophiepembroke.com, which should be about romance and writing but is usually about cake and castles instead.

For Pippa, for everything.

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CHAPTER ONE

FLYNN STARED AT HER, a hint of panic in his usually calm and collected brown eyes. Helena gazed back, hoping she looked slightly less like a small wild animal caught in the open by a predator than he did.

She had to admit, though, that was unlikely. This was very new territory for both of them.

'While I know that what we just did was very noble and right and championed the cause of true love and so on...what on earth do we do now?' Flynn asked.

Helena's mind whirred with the possibilities, just as it had been doing since the moment her sister ran out of the door, leaving her holding both the pearl-encrusted ivory wedding dress and the proverbial baby. They didn't have much in the way of options, and one choice kept rising to the top of the very short list.

'Help me out of this dress.' She placed Thea's wedding dress carefully on a padded armchair, then twisted to try and reach the zip at the back of her own flamingo-pink bridesmaid's dress. Not a chance. No one had arms that bent like that.

She looked up at Flynn. He was still staring at her.

Men. Hopeless in a crisis.

Although, actually, before today she'd have wagered that Flynn would be pretty good in an emergency. By all accounts, he'd handled the discovery that his fiancée had slept with his brother less than twenty-four hours before their wedding with remarkable aplomb. He'd managed the news that he was about to inherit sole responsibility for a multinational media conglomerate without breaking a sweat. He'd even let the aforementioned fiancée, Helena's sister, run out and elope with her true love moments before the wedding without looking particularly perturbed.

But apparently Helena in her underwear was pushing him too far.

With a sigh, she turned to present him with her back and the offending zip. 'Just undo me, yeah?'

Flynn hesitated a moment before she felt his warm fingertips against her back. 'Why am I doing this?'

'Because I need to get changed. Into that.' She pointed at the wedding dress and felt Flynn's hands still at her back.

'No. No, you don't. We'll just go down to the church and...'

She spun round to face him. 'And what? Tell every business associate you have plus a nice collection of reporters—not to mention both sets of parents—that the wedding of the year is off?' Helena shook her head. That option was very firmly a last resort. Never mind the tabloid fallout, or the impact on company shares—her father would have a heart attack.

‘Surely that has to be better than us getting...’ He waved a hand between them and she rolled her eyes.

‘Married, Flynn. Go on, you can say it. It’s not actually a dirty word. You were all set to do it with my sister, and I suspect you weren’t any more in love with her than she was with you. As evidenced by the fact you just told her to elope with Zeke.’

‘That was different,’ Flynn argued. ‘Thea and I had a plan. There was...paperwork.’

The man was completely business bound. Grabbing the file the wedding planner had put together for Thea, Helena pulled out a spare invitation, grabbed the pen from its loop and scratched out her sister’s name to replace it with her own. Then, as an afterthought, she scribbled a few lines on the back on it. ‘Paperwork,’ she said, handing it to Flynn. ‘Happy now?’

‘“I, Helena Morrison, promise to marry Flynn Ashton purely to avoid the hideous fallout of my sister’s elopement,”’ Flynn read. ‘Helena, this is—’

‘Keep going.’ Helena reached behind her to try and work the zip down the last few inches, finally succeeding in wriggling the strapless dress past her hips and into a heap on the floor.

Flynn turned his back on her, and Helena bit back a smile. He was so *proper.*

‘“Furthermore, I agree to renegotiate this contract once the official Morrison-Ashton company business issue thing is dealt with. Signed, Helena Morrison.”’ He placed the makeshift contract carefully on the table as if it were a real and important document. ‘Company business issue thing?’ he asked, sounding puzzled.

‘You know—the whole reason you and Thea were supposed to be getting married in the first place. Whatever that was.’ Helena stepped into her sister’s wedding dress and prayed to God that it fitted well enough to avoid comment. Thea was taller by a couple of inches and Helena had more in the way of curves, but as long as it did up and she could avoid tripping over the hem she’d probably be okay.

‘To join both sides of the business and provide...well, to give the company an heir.’

An heir. A child. Maybe even children, plural. Helena swallowed, then pulled the wedding dress up over her chest. She’d cross that very high and scary bridge when she got to it. Or not. Maybe she could dig a tunnel instead...

Okay, thinking was clearly not her friend today. The exhilaration of Thea’s escape, of being the one left behind to fix things, of this whole crazy plan, thrummed through her veins. She felt high on excitement in a way she hadn’t since she was sixteen.

What she was about to do might be insane but at least it made her feel *alive.*

For now, at least. ‘This doesn’t have to be a permanent arrangement, anyway,’ she said, manoeuvring herself around to Flynn’s side, wedding dress still trailing. ‘Lace me up?’ No zips for the bride. Apparently corset ties were the order of the day.

He obliged without argument, yanking the ties more than tight enough to keep the dress up and tying them in a very efficient bow at the base of her spine. Apparently she was about to marry the one straight man in Europe more comfortable with putting clothes on a woman than taking them off.

‘That wasn’t the arrangement with Thea,’ he told her.

Helena spun round to face him, a fake smile on her face. ‘Yes, well. I’m not Thea, am I?’ Something she seemed to have been pointing out to disappointed friends, relatives and acquaintances for most of her life. Mostly her father, first wondering why she couldn’t be better behaved, more obedient, less trouble. Until trouble had caught up with her at last and suddenly she was perfectly happy to stay home, stay out of trouble, stay safe.

But it hadn’t been enough. Then he’d wanted to know why she couldn’t have her sister’s drive, or brains, or brilliance. Never mind that she *was* less trouble than Thea at last, that she kept their whole family on an even keel, dealing with the fallout from Thea’s latest romantic mishaps.

Just like today, really.

This. This one thing—marrying her own sister's fiancé to safeguard the family name, business and reputation—if this didn't make up for the mistakes of her past, nothing ever would. This was her chance.

She could be enough for Flynn. She might not be Thea, but she was still a Morrison. She could give him what he needed, and maybe marrying him could give her absolution after eight long years in the wilderness.

As long as he never found out why she needed absolution. Flynn, of all people, would never understand that.

Flynn's eyes were serious as she looked into them, steady and firm, and Helena's smile slipped away. He was the ultimate man with the plan, she remembered from overheard business talk and the endless wedding preparations. Could he even do this? Be spontaneous enough to marry a stand-in bride?

'Are you sure you want to do this?' he asked, and Helena rolled her eyes.

'I don't think either of us can be sure about that, given that we've had all of about five minutes to think about it.' There was always a chance that she'd regret this moment, this idea for the rest of her life. But right then...the risk seemed worth it.

'I will walk down there and tell everyone it's off,' Flynn said. 'Just say the word, and you're free.'

Somehow, Helena knew that he'd planned to say those words anyway. That he'd have given Thea a last-minute out too, even if Zeke hadn't come home for the wedding. Flynn was a fair, kind, considerate man. And he might not have been the husband she'd imagined for herself, not least because he was supposed to have been her brother-in-law, but she could have done a lot worse. He was a safe choice. He'd never force her, or trick her or be anything but upfront and honest. It was...refreshing.

This could work, one way or another. Maybe they could make a friendly marriage, for the sake of the family and the business. Or, more likely, it might last a month and then they'd quietly end the whole thing. Either was fine. Flynn wouldn't make a fuss; she knew that much about him. They were the calm two now, the ones who smoothed over rough edges at social gatherings, who kept the joint family dinners his mother insisted on civil, even in the face of insurmountable odds. Between them they'd even hidden the fact that Thea and Zeke had slept together on the villa terrace *during the rehearsal dinner* from the hundred guests inside. Maybe they were meant to be together.

And even if it didn't last, the marriage would have served its purpose as a spectacular PR stunt for Morrison-Ashton and Flynn would be free to find a bride who'd give him heirs by the dozen, if he wanted. Win-win, really.

'I'm sure,' she said, and Flynn smiled.

'Then let's go to church.'

* * *

Flynn wasn't his brother. He didn't like surprises, didn't want the risk-taking high, or the buzz from making spur-of-the-moment decisions that Zeke seemed to crave. Flynn liked to work from a plan, to know what was coming and prepare accordingly. His very existence, and the fact of his birth, was the definition of unplanned—but Flynn had always felt that there was no reason his life had to follow the same pattern.

A childhood of believing he was an 'unexpected variable', or just a straightforward 'mistake'—depending on whether he was eavesdropping on his father or mother's conversation at the time—had made it very clear to him how deviating from a plan could screw things up. Never mind that *he'd* been the plan. It was Zeke who had come along and screwed everything up. But Zeke was blood, the true heir they'd really wanted but thought they couldn't have. Not somebody else's unwanted child, brought in to fill a void as a last resort.

If his parents had stuck with the plan and never had Zeke, Flynn's life could have been very, very different.

So Flynn prized structure, deliverables, timescales and, above all, a plan. But today, his *wedding day*, didn't appear to be about what Flynn liked or wanted.

He'd heard that before, from married friends. How the wedding day became all about the bride and her mother and her friends, and all the groom really had to do was show up and say 'I do'. Of course, every single one of those friends had actually married the woman they got engaged to...

Fear had clenched in his chest as Thea ran out of the door, tearing his carefully worked plan to shreds. Three years he'd been planning this, talking with his father, and hers, making sure they used the wedding to its full potential. Two years working on Thea, agreeing terms, gentling her along.

In the end, all the planning in the world hadn't been enough. Thea was gone, and that left him with...Helena.

Helena wasn't part of the plan, not even a little bit. She was another unplanned variable, he supposed. But maybe that meant something. Maybe together they could be more than a list of mistakes, of unexpected consequences.

Either way, she was the closest he was going to get to following his plan for the day.

He couldn't hide the relief he felt when he realised that Helena really planned to go through with her proposal. Yes, marrying his fiancée's sister raised its own collection of problems. And, yes, an argument could be made that any family or business situation that required this level of absurd subterfuge was seriously screwed up. And yet Flynn found himself agreeing that it was the best of a short list of bad options. Maybe it wasn't the original strategy, but it could at least be considered a contingency plan. It wasn't as if he hadn't discussed the possibility with his father, before settling on Thea as the most beneficial to the company.

This wasn't a love match and it never had been. Whichever of the Morrison sisters walked down the aisle on his arm, the purpose was served. Thea might have understood a little better what she was letting herself in for, but Helena wasn't completely ignorant of the situation either.

Morrison-Ashton needed this. Its board, investors—everyone—needed to know that the future of the company was in safe hands.

And hands didn't come safer than Flynn Ashton's.

Flynn had his own reasons for wanting the match, of course, but surely Helena would realise that too. Thea had, quickly enough.

The company needed the PR boost and, even before he'd really believed he might inherit it one day, Morrison-Ashton had always been Flynn's priority. Now he stood to be CEO within the year...and he needed this more than ever. He needed the authenticity the match gave him. Married to one of the Morrison sisters, it wouldn't matter that he wasn't true Ashton blood. His adoption ceased to matter. Even the fact that his adoption had come through just as Ezekiel and Isabella Ashton had discovered that they were expecting their own flesh and blood child, Zeke, lost meaning as anything more than a crippling irony.

As a child, he'd been surplus to requirements, an inconvenience once the Ashtons had what they'd really wanted all along. And, as he'd grown older, he'd been a weapon in his father's hand, used to whip Zeke into shape, to make him earn his inheritance by fighting Flynn for every advantage, every opportunity. But as the husband of Thea—or Helena—Morrison, Flynn would be legitimate. Deserving.

He'd belong at last.

Taking Helena's hand, he led her out of Thea's dressing room, down the stairs and out of the front door into the blazing Tuscan sunshine. With her body close against his, he could feel the tension in its lines and wondered how fast her heart must be beating right now. Maybe even as hard and fast as his.

Because, despite all his rational thoughts, Flynn couldn't quite lie to himself well enough to pretend there wasn't a chance this would prove to be a colossal mistake. *This doesn't have to be a*

permanent arrangement. Helena's words echoed around his head. To her, this was only temporary; she was a stand-in bride for the occasion. But temporary didn't fulfil Flynn's needs for this marriage.

He needed permanence, he needed authenticity and he needed heirs. That was the plan and, given everything else that had gone wrong, he had to cling on to those facts. Once he married Helena, she was his for life.

He'd just have to figure out a way to convince her that he could be enough for her, that he was worth staying for. Once they got through this horrendous, confusing day.

Flynn blinked in the sunlight. Everything felt somehow more real outside. The summer sounds on the breeze—insects and dry leaves—disappeared behind a peal of bells from the chapel below.

This was really happening. Maybe not the way he'd planned, but the outcome would be more or less the same. He would have made it at last, the moment Helena said 'I do'. And she would, he was sure. She'd been so fierce, so determined to make this work. Why? he wondered suddenly. What did it matter to her? Or was she just so afraid of their parents' wrath that she'd do anything to appease them?

Maybe he'd ask her. Afterwards.

They walked down the path to the chapel in silence, as quickly as Helena's heels would allow. Flynn glanced down at her feet, catching glimpses of the flamingo-pink satin heels that would have matched her bridesmaid's dress. Thea must have run out in her shoes.

Helena's gaze flicked down and she gave him a rueful smile. 'She took the veil, too. Shame, really. We could have kept my face hidden until it was all over, otherwise.'

Something caught in Flynn's chest. Maybe his wedding to Thea hadn't been a grand epic romance but it had been better than this. Helena deserved better than this.

'I don't want to hide you,' he said, hoping it was enough. 'You're going to be my wife. And I'm proud to have you at my side.' All true, even if he was more proud of her name than her person, for now. But Helena had been a sweet child and, since they'd started the wedding planning, a helpful, cheerful woman. Flynn had no doubt that in time he'd grow even fonder of her. Perhaps they'd even fall in love, if they were very lucky. As he'd hoped to do with Thea.

Helena's smile was a little sad but there was no more time to talk. As they rounded the corner to the chapel Thomas Morrison came into view, waiting to walk his daughter down the aisle.

'Helena! Where on earth is Thea? The mob is getting restless in there...' He stopped, staring at her as he took in the dress.

Flynn stepped forward, ready to jump the first hurdle for the pair of them. 'I'm afraid, sir, there's been a slight change of plan...'

* * *

As the string quartet struck up a new tune, Helena realised that, at the back of her mind, she'd expected her father to call their bluff. To tell them the whole idea was ridiculous and send everyone home. At the very least, she'd thought he'd have put up some sort of argument for reason.

But apparently it didn't much matter to him which of his daughters Flynn Ashton married, as long as he married one of them. Today.

The revelation stung a little more than she'd imagined it would after so many years of not being good enough.

This time, *please, this time,* she was going to be good enough.

'That's our cue,' her father whispered in her ear as the violins picked up the melody.

Helena nodded, focusing on not gripping her father's arm too hard as the church doors swung open.

She was really doing this. Marrying Flynn Ashton. And there was no parent or spurned lover about to run in and yell: *Stop the wedding!* Nobody to tell her she was making a colossal mistake, if she was. How could she tell, anyway? This wedding would get them through today and, right now, that was all that mattered. After that...well, she'd figure out what happened next once all these people had gone home.

It had been too much to hope that people might not notice that Flynn was marrying the wrong sister. From the moment the doors opened and Helena took her first step on to the tiled floor of the aisle, there were whispers. They ran through the pews like a wave, the cool and shady chapel suddenly buzzing with scandal and gossip. Helena couldn't make out the words but she could guess the sentiment.

What's happened? What's gone wrong? How did he end up with her? *What does this mean...?*

There were going to be a lot of questions over the next few hours, days and weeks, Helena realised. They'd got off lightly with her dad because there simply wasn't the time. People were waiting, and Thomas Morrison would not disappoint them. *You came to see my daughter get married? Well, here you go. What do you mean, it's the wrong one?*

Helena tried to suppress a giggle at the thought of her father trying to convince his guests that this marriage was what he'd intended all along, but a small squeak escaped. Her father's hand tightened on her arm and, when she glanced up at him, his expression was grim.

Suddenly, nothing was funny any more. Helena tried to focus on the posies of white flowers tied with satin ribbons at the end of each pew, or the pedestal displays—anything except the truth she saw in her father's face.

She'd thought that this would be enough, that marrying Flynn would make up for the past. But her father's expression told another story. If it didn't matter to him which of his daughters got married today, it didn't mean a thing.

Her slate would never be wiped clean, no matter what she did or how far she went. If eight years of being a perfect daughter hadn't been enough, why on earth had she imagined that marrying Flynn might do it? Thomas Morrison held grudges, and he held on tight. The best she could hope for was that Thea would be in so much trouble that she might eclipse Helena's own mistakes for a while.

Thea. How was she ever going to explain this to Thea?

Thea would have stopped her. But Thea was off chasing her own happy ever after, and Helena had stepped right into the very shoes she'd tried to talk her sister out of just a few days before.

Helena glanced down and caught a glimpse of her bright pink bridesmaid's shoes. Not quite Thea's white satin heels, after all. And this wedding, and everything that would follow, wasn't quite as it would have been for Thea, either. There was less paperwork, for a start. Just a scribbled unofficial contract at complete odds with the thirty-page document that had comprised Thea and Flynn's prenuptial agreement.

But, more than that, Helena wasn't Thea. She wasn't the face of the business and she was neither qualified nor willing to take on her sister's role at the company, presuming that Thea didn't come home to take it back herself. She was still a Morrison, and maybe that was enough for Flynn and his father.

For the first time since she'd entered the church, Helena looked past the flowers, the hats and the gossips and stared at her husband-to-be. Standing there beside the priest, his feet slightly apart, hands behind his back, Flynn looked solid. Calm, reliable, steady. All the things Helena had never thought she wanted in her life until eight years ago. Things she'd thought she'd never be able to find, since.

A casual observer, watching his serene expression, would never guess that the woman he was marrying today wasn't the woman he'd proposed to.

Maybe Helena could earn some of that serenity for herself, by marrying Flynn. If she could be what he needed, then surely he could be enough for her. She just couldn't help but wonder how much he was going to ask of her, before she reached that magical point of *enough*.

Give the company an heir.

Terrifying words—words that sent a shudder through her whole body. But they were just words, part of Flynn's agreement with Thea. Not with her. Never her. Because he couldn't know, wouldn't understand—and so she couldn't tell him what a baby would mean to her. How it might destroy her, this time, just to think about it.

The past only stayed in the past until it got dragged into the present. Hadn't Thea and Zeke proved that?

Too late to question what she was doing now, anyway. He'd given her an out and she hadn't taken it. To run at this point would be worse than if she'd never suggested this stupid idea in the first place. No one would ever forgive her for humiliating Flynn Ashton on his wedding day—for letting it happen twice.

No, she was getting married today and all she could do now was make the most of it, until enough time had passed for a discreet divorce.

Head held high, Helena continued to stare down the aisle at her intended husband until suddenly he looked up and met her gaze. His eyes were steady and serious, just like the man himself. Flynn Ashton was stable, reliable—everything Helena needed in her life. He wouldn't let her screw up again; she knew it.

They reached the front row of seats and Flynn stepped forward to meet them for the ceremonial giving away of the bride. As she disentangled her hand from her father's arm, he leant in towards Flynn. 'She's your problem now, son,' he muttered, and Helena's heart stung.

No, even this wasn't enough for him to forgive her. She couldn't imagine why she'd ever thought it would be. That all of this could be anything except a huge mistake.

'I like to think she'll be my partner rather than my problem,' Flynn murmured back, and Helena's gaze flew to his face in surprise.

Maybe, just maybe, marrying Flynn wasn't a mistake. Maybe it was an opportunity.

Maybe it could even be her future.

With a bright smile, Helena turned, gave her father a dry peck on the cheek, then stepped forward in bright pink shoes to meet it.

CHAPTER TWO

HELENA'S HAND FELT warm in his, an unexpected heat in the cool shade of the chapel. There wasn't a lot of warmth coming from the congregation either. More frosty confusion and comments as sharp as icicles. Flynn squared his shoulders as they took the last couple of steps up to the altar together. He'd known this wouldn't be an easy sell but if there was one thing he'd learnt growing up as the cuckoo in the Ashton nest, it was how to smooth over ruffled feathers.

It was a talent that had served him well in business, too. He was the one they brought in when Ezekiel Ashton had offended an investor or a client. The one who talked secretaries into staying when they'd had the sharp edge of Zeke Senior's tongue one too many times.

But, more than that, he was the one who made things happen. Not by making threats, as Ezekiel did, or taking risks and dares as Zeke would have done, but by gentling people along until they almost thought whatever Flynn wanted was their own idea.

The same way he'd persuaded Thea to marry him, in fact.

But *Helena* was the plan now. He just had to smooth the way forward for them. Make it so that everyone realised that, while this particular wedding was unexpected, it was just what they'd all really wanted all along, even if they hadn't known it.

He'd made a good start at that, he hoped, with his comment to Thomas. After all, Thomas might own half the business but he'd leave it to Helena in the end, once she was married to him. He might even disown Thea altogether after today, not that it made much difference. Zeke had made it clear that he was never coming back to Morrison-Ashton. Flynn would be CEO within the year and he'd have Helena at his side.

Which meant Helena, not Thomas, was the important one now.

Another talent Flynn had learnt young: identify the vital person and focus on them. In a family argument, the vital person varied. Usually it was Ezekiel because he was the head of the household, the ultimate authority. Sometimes it was Isabella because her own power, especially over Ezekiel,

couldn't be ignored. Occasionally it was Zeke, but only when two brothers teaming up together could win their parents round to their way of thinking, which wasn't often.

It went without saying that Flynn was never that vital person.

But he wasn't a mistake or an accident, not any more. Not an unfortunate addition or a spare part, to be dragged out when he could be useful. *He* was what the company needed. What the family needed. And all he needed was Helena.

He squeezed Helena's hand, just a small measure of reassurance as the priest smiled at them. Had the old man not realised that there was something amiss today? It was possible. Thea had been out the one time he'd come to call on them. The priest had spoken to Flynn and Helena instead, and had nodded amiably when Flynn had leant forward to murmur their names to him again before Helena walked down the aisle, just to make sure he got it right in the service. It was entirely possible that the man holding the Bible firmly believed that he was joining a young couple in love in the binding act of marriage.

Well, Flynn was on board with the binding part, at least.

As they knelt before the priest, he heard a gasp go up from the congregation behind them. Frowning, he glanced over at his bride and saw her trying to hide a smile behind her hand.

'What?' he mouthed, raising an eyebrow.

Helena gave a tiny shake of her head, but lowered her hand long enough to whisper, 'I think they just clocked the shoes.'

Of course. Those ridiculous pink shoes.

Flynn kept his eyes on the floor in front of him. In all honesty, he quite liked the shoes. Liked the flash of colour and spirit they showed, just like the woman wearing them had when she'd stepped into that wedding dress at the last moment. They were right for Helena.

But they weren't appropriate for a Morrison-Ashton bride, of course. Not for a formal, prestigious event like this. Especially when they were on the wrong feet.

He couldn't let those pink high heels ruin everything. Everything else could go perfectly, Helena could be a perfect blushing bride, and all it would take would be the wrong society matron friend of his mother's saying, 'But did you see those *shoes?'* and suddenly everyone would have permission to pick the whole marriage apart.

As if they weren't going to do that anyway.

Flynn sighed, resigned himself to making the best of a bad day and tried to tune in to what the priest was saying. Before he knew it, they were at the only part of the service that really mattered —the promises and vows.

'Flynn and Helena, have you come here freely and without reservation to give yourself to each other in marriage?' The priest intoned the words with the sort of gravity that made it clear these were serious questions.

Flynn exchanged a fleeting glance with Helena as they both answered, 'Yes.' He wondered if she was thinking the same thing that he was—that he had many, many reservations about this. But he was going to go through with it anyway.

'Will you honour each other as man and wife for the rest of your lives?'

'I will,' Flynn said, Helena's agreement coming just a heartbeat behind.

She'd said it now, and that knowledge filled Flynn with triumph. The rest of their lives. That was exactly how long he needed to prove he deserved this—his place in the family and the business. He knew the board members and the investors. He knew what they needed in order to believe in and respect Flynn's new place at Morrison-Ashton.

Ezekiel Ashton had made it clear for years that Flynn didn't count, that he wasn't a true heir. Even if Zeke hadn't known it, everyone else associated with the business had never doubted for a moment that Zeke was the one who'd inherit.

But not any more. Now that place was Flynn's and the next few moments would cement it for life.

'Will you accept children lovingly from God, and bring them up according to the law of Christ and his Church?'

Beside him, Helena sucked in a breath, just loud enough for him to hear. As if she was steeling herself for something unpleasant. He frowned.

'I will,' Helena said, strong and clear, but Flynn couldn't shake the feeling that he'd just missed something important.

Like saying his line.

'I will,' he said, aware of the priest's waiting gaze.

'Good.' The priest cracked a creaky smile. 'Then, next, we have the vows. Flynn?'

He'd memorised this, had been prepared to stare into Thea's eyes and say just the right words. But now, as he turned to face his bride and take her hand, looking down further than he'd expected to, Flynn realised he hadn't a clue what her middle name was.

His panic must have shown on his face because Helena rolled her eyes and mouthed 'Juliette' at him, allowing his heartbeat to return to normal again.

'I, Flynn, take you, Helena Juliette Morrison, to be my wife.' She smiled as he spoke, and Flynn relaxed into the familiar words. 'I promise to be true to you in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health. I will love you and honour you, all the days of my life.'

He hoped she could hear how much he meant it. Love...maybe that would come and maybe it wouldn't. But honour, constancy and fidelity—those he could give her.

It was the least he could do, given what he would gain from the bargain. She was his now, along with the respectability and the place she brought him. It was done at last.

Flynn couldn't help but think he should feel more relieved about that.

* * *

'I, Helena, take you, Flynn Michael Ashton, to be my husband.' The words came out strong and clear, and Helena gave silent thanks that the trembling taking over her insides wasn't visible or audible to the congregation. She'd learnt the vows by heart practising them with Thea; she could recite them with her eyes closed. Which might actually be easier than staring up into Flynn's face, trying to look suitably besotted and loving.

Every single person listening was waiting to see if they'd really go through with it. Maybe some thought it was a stunt, some crazy PR thing. Maybe they even believed that Thea would appear from the wings to take her rightful place at any moment.

Wow. Those people were going to be *really* disappointed.

Most people, Helena suspected, were just waiting to see if this marriage would really happen, and hoping that at some point over the next few hours they'd find out why.

This was the scandal of the year, and not one of Isabella's friends would rest until they knew what had really happened behind the scenes today.

Isabella. Helena sneaked a sideways look at the front pew as she promised to be true, to love and honour and all the rest of that stuff. Flynn and Zeke's mother sat with a fixed smile on her face, hands clasped around a handkerchief in her lap, the wide brim of her hat shading her eyes. Helena would bet that if she could see any tears in them, they wouldn't be tears of joy.

Explaining this mess to Flynn's parents was not going to be fun. Maybe she'd leave that to him. Refine the art of wifely delegating early.

Her vows done, the priest picked up the baton again. 'What God has joined, man must not divide,' he intoned.

Gosh, that sounded formal. Binding.

Final.

Well, what did he know? He'd happily married the wrong couple without batting an eyelid. There was a pretty strong chance that none of this was even legal. It would be fine.

'Do you have the rings?' the priest asked, and Helena's eyes widened. Did they? What had even happened to them?

But Flynn reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a ring box, flipping open the lid to reveal two shiny platinum rings. Helena knew those rings, had helped choose those rings.

She also knew there was a good chance that the ring Flynn was about to try and put on her finger wouldn't fit.

As the priest blessed the rings, Helena tried to convey this information to her new husband using only her eyes and eyebrows. Anything else would signal to their audience that there was a problem.

Flynn's forehead furrowed in confusion and Helena resigned herself to losing the outer layer of skin on her ring finger.

'Helena, take this ring as a sign of my love and fidelity.' Flynn took her left hand solemnly and Helena braced herself as the cold metal touched the tip of her finger. 'In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.'

Flynn eased the ring down to her knuckle, where it promptly got stuck. His gaze flashed to hers and she gave him what she hoped was an imperceptible shake of the head.

He understood, thank goodness. His fingers moved down to the base of her finger, but the ring stayed jammed where it was. With a sunny smile, Helena withdrew her hand and hid it in the folds of her dress. She'd ease it further on later, if she could. Otherwise she'd sneak up to her room and find some other ring to serve for the time being.

Flynn's ring slipped on with no problems, of course, since he was actually supposed to be there getting married today. And suddenly the priest was pronouncing them husband and wife and it was all over. Helena blinked out at the applauding crowd and felt grateful that the line 'You may now kiss the bride' seemed to appear more often in movies than at actual weddings.

She was married now. And she did realise that the chances were she'd have to kiss her husband, sooner or later.

It was just that she was voting for later. When her emotions and thoughts weren't spinning like a tornado. When she could sit quietly for a moment and figure all this out, and think about what would happen next.

When she'd had time to prepare herself.

With her hand tucked into the crook of Flynn's elbow, hiding the ill-fitting wedding ring, Helena walked back up the aisle she'd walked down as a single woman. As Helena Morrison.

Now she was Helena Ashton.

She was pretty sure she would never get used to that.

Helena fought to keep her expression bright and happy, tilting her head to brush against Flynn's shoulder as they walked.

'Nearly there,' he murmured as they approached the back of the church. 'Almost over.'

Except it wasn't. Not even a little bit.

The Tuscan sunlight stung her eyes and her skin as they emerged from the cool shade of the chapel. They only had a few moments before everyone else followed, so Helena ripped her hand from Flynn's arm and began to twist Thea's wedding ring over her knuckle. If only she had some hand cream in her bag. Or even her bag.

Brides travelled light, it seemed.

With a pop, the ring slid past the knuckle and into place, and Helena exhaled with relief. One problem down, who knew how many more to go.

As the guests emerged, Helena plastered her best social smile back on to her face. Which, as the first person out was Ezekiel Ashton, was a bit of a waste.

'What, exactly—?' the old man started, only to be cut off by his wife.

‘Not here,’ Isabella said, her voice quiet but sharp. Helena had no doubt that there would be long discussions about what had occurred that day, but Isabella wouldn’t have them happening in front of the guests. ‘We have the photos to get through.’

‘Forget the photos,’ Ezekiel said. ‘What do we need photos for?’

‘The papers, apart from anything else,’ Isabella answered promptly. ‘This is still the wedding of the season, regardless of who actually got married.’ Her voice dropped low for the last half of the sentence and Helena winced.

Photos. Helena’s smile slipped at the thought until Isabella glared at her and she forced it back into place. Where apparently it would stay for the next hour or more, while the semi-famous photographer Isabella had flown over from the States took endless shots of her and Flynn looking happy and slightly shell-shocked.

Oh, well. Wasn’t that how all brides and grooms looked on their wedding day?

* * *

An hour of endless fake smiles later, Helena’s face ached. Still, photos over and done with, she kissed the cheek of the next guest in the reception line, wishing she’d made everyone wear name tags for the occasion. She might know the guest list backwards after helping to put it together, but putting faces to those memorised names was another matter entirely.

Thea would have known them, though. Thea would have wined and dined them as clients in the past, would already have asked them questions about their kids or their pets. No wonder they were all looking at Helena with such confusion and curiosity. She wasn’t what they’d expected, or wanted.

She was kind of used to that.

Beside her, Flynn seemed totally at ease, chatting happily with every person who came past. He, at least, seemed pleased with how the day had turned out.

‘Such a beautiful day,’ a woman in a green hat said, fake smile making it clear that she might well be talking about the weather rather than the wedding.

‘Wasn’t it?’ Isabella said, ignoring the false undertone. ‘We’re all just so delighted to be one happy family at last.’

‘I’m sure,’ Mrs Green Hat replied. ‘Although you do seem to be missing a couple of members right now!’

Isabella’s tinkling laugh gave away nothing. ‘Oh, well, we have everyone who really matters right here, don’t we?’

‘I suppose so. Except you do seem to be missing a best man, at least.’ Good grief, the woman was relentless! ‘I heard Zeke was home for the wedding, and I was so looking forward to seeing him. Such a bright young man.’

Isabella’s expression froze at that, her grin nudging towards a rictus. Leaning between them, Helena plastered on what she hoped was an apologetic smile. ‘I’m so sorry to hurry you along, but I’m afraid the line is already out of the door and people are more than ready for the wedding breakfast, I’m sure. Perhaps you and Isabella can catch up a little later?’

Mrs Green Hat looked a little sour at the interruption, as if too much lemon had been squeezed in her gin and tonic, but she nodded politely anyway. No one argued with the bride on her wedding day, did they?

‘Of course. Isabella, I look forward to talking with you and *both* your sons later.’ She stalked off towards the dining room, not even bothering to acknowledge Thomas at the end of the line, which Helena thought was just plain *rude,* thank you very much. Although, quite honestly, Thomas probably deserved it today. But Mrs Green Hat didn’t know that.

Now, if she’d avoided Ezekiel, who continued to glower at every single person he spoke to, she could understand it.

It took forever, but eventually the last of the guests paraded past them and into the dining room. Ezekiel immediately disappeared in the direction of his study without so much as a by-your-leave, but Helena wasn't complaining.

In fact, she let out a sigh of relief and slipped her feet out of her heels for a moment, letting the cool stone floor soothe her toes.

'I don't understand why Thea couldn't at least leave her shoes and veil if she had to run out on us at the last moment.' Isabella peered critically at the bright pink shoes lying on the floor. Thomas must have filled her in on the events of the day, Helena supposed. 'It would be common courtesy, really.'

Rather than not actually running out on her wedding in the first place, Helena supposed. Isabella always did obsess about the details. It wasn't the first time she'd missed the big picture because of it.

'I like the pink ones,' she said, partly just to annoy her new mother-in-law.

'So do I, actually,' Flynn said, standing beside her, and she flashed him a huge smile. Maybe this was why people got married—to have someone on their side when they had to deal with their parents. She'd heard of worse reasons.

Thomas, with a weary sigh, lowered himself into an armchair at the edge of the hallway. 'I suppose we should have known. It's not like she didn't have form. I wonder where they are now.' He stared out of the open front door as he spoke and Helena couldn't help but follow his gaze.

'Zeke and Thea?' Isabella asked. 'God only knows. Probably off somewhere trying to find new ways to destroy our family.'

'They were in love,' Helena said, without even realising she planned to say it. 'They wanted to be together. And we thought...well, we thought this was the best option. Flynn and I.' She reached for him blindly, relieved when Flynn grabbed her hand and held it tight.

'We did,' he agreed. 'Still do, actually.'

Isabella studied her so intently that Helena stared at her toes to avoid her gaze. Her pedicure was the exact same colour as her shoes, she realised with pleasure. She almost wanted to point it out to her mother-in-law, to prove that she was good at details, too.

'Maybe you were right,' Isabella said finally. 'It might all be for the best. At least you're less likely to make a dramatic scene than your sister. If it hadn't been for Thea's place in the company...well, I might have suggested to Ezekiel that he pick you for Flynn instead. I said as much to Thea, actually. So I suppose she knew she had a stand-in, if she needed it.'

'Mother,' Flynn said, the hint of warning in his voice enough to make Isabella stop talking.

But it couldn't stop the icy fingers that crept up the back of Helena's neck at her words. She tugged her hand free from Flynn's. It wasn't just Isabella making it perfectly clear that Helena was second choice, a last resort. She already knew that, thanks. But had Thea really known what would happen? Helena thought not. But it seemed, however cross Ezekiel might be, Isabella wasn't too disappointed with this turn of events. Why would she be? She got a docile, eager to please wife for her son. Flynn had probably been overjoyed when she'd suggested it.

Except, of course, he knew that it was potentially only temporary. Isabella didn't.

But it was only a matter of time before she found out.

* * *

Flynn's hand felt suddenly cold without Helena's in it. Curse his mother. Wasn't it enough that *he* had to know that he was an unfortunate backup plan without her driving it home that his new bride was in exactly the same position?

It was time to get the focus back where it belonged—on *their* marriage, rather than the one that hadn't happened.

'Is that all the guests in?' he asked.

'Finally, yes,' Helena said with a small hint of a smile, as if she knew what he was trying to do.

'God only knows how much wine they'll have got through already.' Isabella tucked her hand through Thomas's arm. 'We'll go in and take our seats, then the steward can come and announce

you. Is your father coming back?' The last part was added almost as an afterthought, Flynn realised. While Ezekiel might believe this whole day was all about him and his company, as far as Isabella was concerned, this was a social occasion presided over by herself and Thomas. The man she'd never quite left her husband for, but who was more of a husband to her anyway.

Wow, his family was screwed up.

'I'm sure he'll come through eventually,' Flynn said, even though Ezekiel hadn't even mentioned he was leaving, let alone returning to the festivities. It would be just like his father to spite them all after having his plans meddled with. Flynn was pretty certain that, actually, Ezekiel would be perfectly content with Helena as a daughter-in-law. It was just the fact that he hadn't been consulted, or had the final say in the matter, that rankled the old man.

Thomas and Isabella made their way through to the dining room and, rather suddenly, Flynn was alone with his wife for the first time since they'd decided to go through with the marriage. No, not the marriage. That still hadn't been decided, and wouldn't be until they had a document rather more legally binding than a scrawled-on invitation with the wrong name on the front. The wedding, then. That much, at least, they had certainly gone through with.

That much had paperwork.

'I'm sorry about that,' he said apologetically. 'You know my mother.'

'Rather too well,' Helena agreed, and he couldn't help but smile.

'Yes, well. How did you cope with your first official event as an Ashton—the receiving line, I mean? It seemed to go pretty smoothly to me.'

'Yeah, it was fine, mostly. There were a couple of extra-nosy people asking about Zeke—not Thea, of course, that would be too obvious. Your mother and I put them off, for now anyway.' She sighed. 'Although I dread to think what sort of questions they'll be ready to ask after a few too many glasses of champagne.'

She was right, Flynn realised. Sheer politeness might have stopped the bulk of the comments and observations in the church itself, but once the speeches were over all bets would be off.

Which meant the speeches would have to be something quite spectacular, to give them something else to talk about. Or something else to believe, about the way this day had gone.

'We have to change the story,' he said, and Helena's smile turned awkward.

'You got that from Thea,' she said when he raised an eyebrow. 'That's one of her big PR phrases.'

'Well, it applies today. We need to change people's perceptions of what happened here today.' And quickly, since he could already see the steward coming to fetch them.

'Like the fact you married the wrong woman?'

'Exactly that.'

The steward moved to open the door and Helena grabbed Flynn's arm as she slipped her slim feet back into those bright pink shoes.

'Any idea how?' she murmured, as the dining room doors opened and the steward stepped through.

'One or two,' Flynn muttered back.

'Like?'

But then the steward was announcing them as Mr and Mrs Flynn Ashton, and the show was on again. Helena would just have to wait and see. Flynn smiled to himself. Fixing this could be his wedding present to her.

CHAPTER THREE

IT WAS HARD not to be a little bitter. Helena had spent weeks choosing the perfect menu for this dinner, along with Isabella and the wedding planner and even Thea when she'd had time. They'd tasted and sampled all kinds of dishes, weighed up the pros and cons of a fish course against a sorbet between courses, and debated the merits of local versus imported cheeses for hours. And now, here

she was, sitting right in the middle of the top table—and she'd barely tasted a mouthful of any of the plates put in front of her.

It wasn't that she didn't want to eat. She was starving, as it happened. But the very efficiently tied corset laces were starting to make breathing a bit more of an issue than she'd like, and she didn't want to strain them any more than she had to.

She stared longingly at the dessert in front of her and resigned herself to just a small taste. And to staying away from the champagne. Bubbles always went straight to her head, and on an empty stomach they'd be disastrous. Especially today. Today, she needed all of her faculties about her.

'Are you okay? You're looking kind of...pink,' Flynn asked, leaning in. Helena supposed to the crowds of guests it looked as if he was murmuring sweet nothings in his bride's ear. Not asking her why her complexion had coloured to match her shoes.

'It's the corset. It was okay standing up but now it's kind of...binding.' Which it was supposed to be, really. It was just that Helena was so very fond of oxygen. And dessert.

Flynn didn't answer immediately. Helena glanced up to see his cheeks approaching shoe colour, too. 'I'm sorry. Do you want me to...?' He trailed off, waving a hand behind her back.

Helena shook her head. 'Too late now. It'll be fine. I just need to make it through the speeches then I'll escape and find a maid or someone to adjust it.'

'Just don't let any of the guests see you.' Flynn flashed her a quick grin. 'You'll have the rumour mill announcing you're pregnant in no time.'

Pregnant. Of course. Because she was married now. And that was what married women did, wasn't it? Gave their husbands babies.

Isabella probably wouldn't even cry and send her away this time.

This time, it wouldn't be a scandal, a shameful thing. It would be wanted, loved. Kept.

And the fact it might break her heart again still wouldn't matter.

A waiter reached in to clear her barely touched plate and Helena murmured a thank you, more grateful for the interruption to her thoughts than the service.

'Time for the speeches next,' she said, visualising the timetable for the day as she'd seen it on the wedding planner's clipboard.

'And your dad's up first. At least he always makes a good speech.'

Helena stared at him in disbelief, but Flynn appeared utterly unaware of what he'd said. 'A good speech?'

'Well, yeah.' Flynn shrugged. 'Doesn't he? I mean, he does all those charity event speaker things, and he always talks well to the board. And I thought he did pretty well last night, at the rehearsal dinner.'

Helena shook her head. 'No wonder Thea slept with Zeke,' she muttered. After listening to their father's speech about her the night before—including, amongst other things, a line about how glad he was that, by agreeing to marry Flynn, Thea had finally made a decision in her personal life as good as the ones she made in business—even Helena had been ready to flee the room. And Flynn hadn't even noticed that his fiancée might have been a bit upset.

She wondered what little gems Dad would have in store for her. Assuming that he'd taken the time to rewrite it from his original speech, as planned for Thea. He might not. They seemed fairly interchangeable to him today—neither one of his daughters living up to what he wanted or expected from them.

She didn't have to wait long to find out. The moment the last of the plates were cleared, Thomas Morrison was on his feet, carefully clinking the silverware against a champagne flute.

'Ladies and gentlemen, friends and family, welcome—welcome to you all!' Thomas smiled broadly around at the assembled company, and Helena wondered exactly how much of the champagne he'd had that afternoon.

‘On this very special day, I’d like to thank you all for travelling to be with us, not just on my own behalf, but on behalf of my dear old friends, Ezekiel and Isabella, too. I know that they feel, as I do, that this day would not have been so magical without all of you here to share it.’

Pause for applause. Flynn did have a point, although she’d never admit as much. Her father knew how to play a crowd.

It was just a shame he didn’t know how to make his own daughters feel as special.

‘This day, this joining of our two families, has been long coming, and long desired. Not just for the obvious reasons of business—although I know several of you very pleased to see your stocks and shares safe for another generation!’ Laughter, mostly from a table of middle-aged men in pinstriped suits with much younger wives towards the back of the room. ‘No, I have far greater reasons for wanting to see our families irrevocably linked.’

Helena swallowed at the word *irrevocably*, and felt Flynn flinch beside her. Was he thinking about how to get out of this marriage, like she was? Or was he plotting how to keep her in it?

‘Helena, my Helena, has always been my golden child. My baby girl. And to see her safe and secure with a man such as Flynn, a man I already trusted with my company, is quite frankly a joy!’

If her cheeks had been pink from oxygen deprivation before, then they had to be bright red and clashing with her shoes by now. As she stared at her full champagne glass, watching the bubbles rise and pop, Flynn sneaked his hand into hers and she squeezed gratefully.

‘Flynn—’ Thomas turned to address his new son-in-law directly ‘—you have been given a precious gift today. I expect you to take very good care of it.’

‘I will, sir.’ Flynn’s voice was sure and certain, and the whole room burst into applause again at the sound of it.

‘Okay, maybe he’s not dreadful at speeches,’ Helena murmured to Flynn but, even as she said it, Thomas launched into a long, overdone thank you speech to Isabella for all she’d done in helping to raise her and organise the day. ‘Sometimes.’

‘Wait until you hear mine,’ Flynn teased. But Helena tensed at the very idea. What on earth was he going to say? *Hi, guys, I know you came to see me marry that other girl but, hey, change of plan and, under the circumstances, this was the best I could do. More champagne, anyone?*

‘*This* you’re worried about?’ Flynn asked, his voice low but amazed. ‘Marrying a guy you never even considered as a possible date on no notice in someone else’s wedding dress, fine. But the thought of me making a speech makes you tense up? You don’t need the corset, your shoulders are so rigid.’

‘Not the thought of you making a speech. The thought of you adapting a speech about Thea to suit me on the spot. The fact that everyone here will know you’re actually talking about another woman.’

Flynn didn’t reply immediately, and when Helena looked up his expression was thoughtful. ‘Just wait and listen,’ he said finally, just as Thomas asked the room to be upstanding for the bride and groom.

‘To Flynn and Helena!’ She supposed she should just be glad that most people managed to get her name right.

Flynn got to his feet as everyone else sat down, and Helena gave up worrying about the tightness of her corset laces. It wasn’t as if she could breathe while this was going on anyway.

‘It’s traditional, I know, for the groom to toast the bridesmaids,’ he started.

Helena winced instinctively. *That’s right—draw attention to exactly what’s untraditional about this wedding.*

‘But, as you might have noticed, my wife and I don’t actually have any today.’

A nervous laugh, and not even the usual cheer at the use of ‘my wife and I’. Yeah, this was going to go *brilliantly.*

‘A lot of things about today’s wedding might not have been exactly as people were expecting. But, in fact, everything is just as it should be.’

He smiled down at her and something in Helena's chest loosened, for the first time that day.

'All along, we knew we wanted to join our families together, to go into the future as a pair, a team. We wanted to secure our future, and our future happiness. But you can't make a plan for love; you can't schedule romance and desire. You can't outsmart Cupid, as Helena and I learned.'

It was all true, Helena realised. Everything he was saying accurately described Thea and Zeke's discoveries and disappointments of the last couple of days. But the way he said it, the way he smiled lovingly at her as he spoke...it was as if he were telling a different story altogether.

Their story.

'Duty is one thing; family duty something altogether heavier. But true love...well, true love trumps them all.' Women were 'aahing' around the tables, and Helena thought she might even have seen one of the middle-aged men in the pinstriped suits wipe at his eyes. How was Flynn doing this?

'I truly believe that our wedding today is just the first stop on a journey of a lifetime. With Helena, I feel like I have come home at last. Together we, and our families, have a wonderful future ahead of us. And I couldn't be prouder to have my wife by my side as we venture into it.'

Flynn tugged her up to stand beside him, one arm wrapped around her waist, and raised his glass. 'To Helena,' he said, and the room echoed with the repeats.

And just for a moment, standing there in her sister's too tight wedding dress with the wrong shoes pinching her feet, Helena could see the future Thea had planned for herself. A future of acceptance and appreciation, having a man beside her who always managed to say the right thing at the right time.

It almost seemed like the fairy tale it was supposed to be. For a moment, anyway. Until her guests started calling for something more.

'Kiss her!' Mr Teary-Pinstripes called. 'Kiss, kiss, kiss, kiss!' The rest of his table picked up the chant. Then the rest of the room.

Suddenly, Helena almost wished the corset *was* tight enough to make her faint.

Imagining a fairy tale future wasn't the same as kissing the prince. This wasn't how it was supposed to go. They'd managed to avoid it in the church, where at least it would have been expected to be a chaste and swift kiss. Here, now, after all the wine and the toasts...these people wanted the real thing, and anything less was only going to start up rumours again.

She couldn't let that happen. Not after Flynn's speech had tidied away all the talk so neatly.

If they wanted a kiss, she was going to have to give it to them.

She turned to Flynn, eyebrows raised, and he echoed the gesture. 'I never thought my first kiss with my husband would be quite so public,' she murmured, quiet enough that she knew it wouldn't be heard over the chanting.

'It's just for show.' He flashed her a quick smile.

Just a show. Of course. They weren't really in love, whatever Flynn had suggested in his speech. This marriage was only temporary, just until they could sort everything out. It wouldn't—couldn't—last. Not when she couldn't give Flynn what he wanted most.

None of which explained why there seemed to be too much blood in her veins, or why she couldn't look away from Flynn's caramel-brown eyes as he smiled down at her.

Helena's heart raced as he wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her close, the chanting turning to cheering around them.

It's just for show. The words spun in her head, but all Helena could think as Flynn bent in to kiss her was: *If this is just a show, how am I going to survive the real thing?*

* * *

Just a show. That was the key.

Except it wasn't.

Yes, the only reason his first kiss with his wife was taking place in front of a captive audience was to prove a point—to show them that Helena wasn't some sort of poor consolation prize. But that wasn't enough. He had to show *Helena* that too.

And Helena knew the truth.

If he wanted her to stick with this—to believe they had a real future together—well, that future had to start right now. With their first kiss.

'Kiss, kiss, kiss, kiss!' The chanting around them faded into nothing as he leant in closer, his eyes closing as his lips brushed against hers, softly at first, not wanting to spook her. But then, oh, then... Flynn's fingers clutched at her hip, the silk of her dress slipping against his skin as he deepened the kiss.

She tasted like champagne and gold, expensive and sparkling, her mouth warm and willing under his. He'd wanted to prove a point with this kiss but, for the life of him, he couldn't remember what it was. All he could think about was how soft her body was against his, how perfectly it fitted to him.

He opened his eyes, wanting to drink in the sight of her too, wanting to see her reaction, to know if she was as affected as him. But Helena's eyes were closed and, along with his vision, his hearing seemed to return too—or at least his awareness of it.

The chanting had turned to cheering—when, Flynn didn't know. But he was suddenly aware that he was making a spectacle of himself—and Helena—by falling so completely into what was supposed to be a simple kiss. Just a moment to appease the crowd, and a promise of what could follow later.

If their first kiss had knocked him senseless, what would their second do to him? Never mind their third and fourth...

Reluctantly, Flynn loosened his hold on his wife and pulled back, just enough to signal to Helena that the kiss was over. Her eyelids fluttered open and Flynn was gratified to see misty confusion in her bluebell bright eyes, too. At least he wasn't the only one losing his mind over a kiss.

'Well,' Isabella said in a low voice as they pulled apart, 'at least no one here is left in any doubt that you both got what you wanted out of this arrangement.' Flynn couldn't tell if his mother disapproved of that or not. It was often hard to tell with Isabella. He found it easiest to assume that she did disapprove, most of the time.

Not that it made any difference now. He was married to Helena and there was nothing anyone could do about that.

The cheering had turned to chatter and laughter now, after a smattering of applause. Helena's cheeks were pink as she sat down, and Flynn flattered himself that the blush had less to do with her corset than it had.

'Nearly there now,' he murmured to her, reaching to take her hand. She let him hold it long enough for a reassuring squeeze then tugged it away again, giving him a polite, but non-committal, smile.

Flynn frowned. What had changed? She'd been right there with him in that kiss, he could tell. So why the cool distance now?

As the guests finished their coffees and headed through to the adjoining room, where a bar had been set up for them while the band set up on the terrace, Flynn studied his bride as she sipped tea, and considered.

Helena had been instrumental in the wedding planning, but she hadn't been part of the prenuptial contract discussions. But she *was* Thea's sister. They'd have talked about the terms of the agreement, surely? Which meant that Helena probably knew that marital relations hadn't been contractually required for the first couple of years. Thea had wanted time to settle into married life, and to continue to build up her career, before they started a family. And, since they weren't in love, or even in lust, sex wasn't really necessary until then. At least, on paper.

There was a firm fidelity clause, though. And Thea had changed her mind, just two nights ago, about what she wanted from the marriage in physical terms. She'd wanted them to get to know each other as man and wife, and have that time together first before kids.

Although how much that decision had to do with her trying to hide her feelings for his brother, Flynn suspected he was better off not knowing.

Still, maybe she hadn't discussed that change of plans with Helena. And, even if she had, there was no contract between Helena and him. No carefully debated and worded agreement, no consensus of opinion. Just confusion, lack of clarity and the potential for miscommunication.

This was why the world needed paperwork.

He'd have to talk to her, discuss the situation and what they wanted to happen next. It was useful to have a good idea of their individual needs before they got the solicitors involved, or at least that was what he'd found with her sister.

But that would have to wait until he got her alone. And with two hundred wedding guests still watching them closely—either waiting for another kiss or some sign of what really went down that morning—Flynn didn't see that happening very soon.

A smile crept on to his face as a thought occurred to him. There was one chance for them to be almost alone, if still observed, very soon indeed.

'What are you smiling at?' Helena asked from beside him.

'I'm just looking forward to our first dance,' he answered honestly.

'Well, it can't be any more of a spectacle than our first kiss.' Helena covered her eyes for a moment, obviously embarrassed.

'Don't knock the kiss,' Flynn said, leaning back in his chair. 'I think that kiss might set the tone for our whole marriage.'

Helena's gaze flashed up to his face, uncertainty in her eyes. Flynn tried to give her a reassuring look. She'd feel better once they'd agreed terms. And he'd feel better once he knew she was in this for the long haul. He could persuade her that sticking with the marriage was better for everybody, he was sure.

Even if he had to kiss her a hundred more times to convince her.

* * *

'And now, please welcome Mr and Mrs Flynn Ashton on to the floor for their first dance!'

Helena thought her face might crack from all the smiling. Still, she tried to keep up the ecstatically happy bride act as she took Flynn's hand and stepped out into the middle of the ballroom. How had Isabella even managed to *find* a villa with a ballroom? The woman had to have ridiculous magical abilities or something.

Helena just hoped she'd use her powers for good.

'You okay?' Flynn asked as the band struck up the first notes of the first dance. *It Had to Be You*. Thea had picked it after glancing over the band's set list, and Helena still wasn't sure if she'd meant it as a joke. Except Thea wasn't stuck dancing to it for the next three and a half minutes or whatever. Helena was.

'I'm fine.' She smiled up at her husband and hoped he wouldn't notice she was lying. She was a long way from fine.

It was the kiss that had started it. The kiss that had left her knees weak and her brain foggy. Followed by all the sincere congratulations that no one had offered *before* Flynn's speech and a roomful of strangers telling her how this must be the happiest day of her life.

Helena was pretty sure it would go down forever as the most bizarre and confusing. But *happiest*? That really wasn't the right word for it.

Flynn led her around the dance floor without her even having to think about where her feet went next, as if he had a diagram in his head that he just had to follow and everything would be graceful and perfect. Which, actually, knowing Flynn, he probably did.

‘So,’ he said as the singer launched into the second verse, ‘I think we made it through the day without disaster.’

‘I guess we did.’ After the dancing, all that was left was the sending off. Except she and Flynn weren’t going anywhere except upstairs to bed.

Bed.

Oh.

Where were they going to sleep? The bridal suite Thea had been using, which would have been set up for a romantic wedding night while they were all down at the chapel? Or the smaller room Helena had taken as her own? Or even Flynn’s room at the far end of the villa?

And, more importantly, was Flynn expecting that they’d be going to bed *together?*

‘About that,’ she said, stumbling a little as her shoe got stuck in the too-long hem of her dress. Flynn caught her, strong hands keeping her upright and even still dancing as she found her balance. ‘I mean, about making it through the day. And to the night. Um...’

Flynn gave a low chuckle that somehow sounded dirtier than she’d ever imagined he was capable of. ‘Don’t worry. I don’t think anyone is going to be sober enough to notice where either of us sleep tonight. Why don’t you take the bridal suite, just in case anyone checks, and I’ll stick with my room? I’ll have work to do in the morning anyway, and my laptop and files are all set up in there.’

Of course. Work.

Just when she was starting to think that Flynn was a little more enthusiastic about this wedding than she’d expected. But no, it was all just the show, the spectacle, still.

Except that kiss hadn’t felt like a show. It had definitely been a spectacle, but it had felt...real. Tingly.

But she wasn’t supposed to be getting tingly feelings about this man. Her husband. Stupid as it seemed. She needed to keep this business-like and official until they could sit down and agree a way to get out of it. As she’d told him that morning, this didn’t have to be forever.

Couldn’t be forever.

If she didn’t end this early enough, she’d have to tell him everything, sooner or later. Explain why she couldn’t give him all the things he wanted. Had Isabella already realised? Was that why she’d looked so frustrated all day, whenever no one important had been looking?

The band launched into a repeat of the last verse, and Flynn spun her round with a little more enthusiasm. Not enough to be called abandon, of course. And probably planned ahead of time. But the crowd cheered anyway, and Helena tried to improve her mood with the knowledge that this was nearly all over. Another hour or so and they’d serve the cake and light supper buffet, even though no one could possibly be hungry again after the dinner they’d just eaten—except her. And she still couldn’t eat because of the ridiculous corset.

Maybe she could smuggle a doggy bag upstairs under her skirts...

The band came to a triumphant finish and Flynn dipped her low over his arm. Helena’s heel slid against the wooden floor for a second, then held. Heart racing, she looked up into her husband’s eyes and realised her heart wasn’t going to slow down any time soon.

Polite applause echoed in her ears as Flynn’s smile—a slow private one she wasn’t used to—spread across his face and she realised that she was still half upside down with her hair threatening to break free from its pins.

Deliberately, he raised her up to standing again, but his arm tight around her waist kept her upright. Her mind spun—from the dance, from the dip, but mostly from the realisation that she’d thought Flynn was about to kiss her again. Had expected it, almost as her due.

Had wanted it.

And that was dangerous.

With a tight smile, she shuffled back out of his arms. Flynn let her go easily and she tried to stamp down the small swell of disappointment she felt at that.

‘I think my father has the next dance,’ she said as the band struck up the next tune.

‘Of course,’ Flynn replied, still smiling. ‘And who are we to mess with tradition?’

‘Who, indeed?’ Helena twirled away, hitching her dress up a little to avoid tripping, and went to find her father. He might not always be her favourite person but he was a great deal safer to be around than her husband right now.

* * *

Several hours and considerably more dances later, the evening finally approached its end. Helena had thought about staging a grand departure earlier, but realised that would leave her alone in the bridal suite with her husband and two hundred people downstairs listening for signs of the marriage being consummated.

So not happening.

But at midnight the coaches and cars arrived like carriages on the driveway and the staff efficiently and discreetly persuaded everyone out of the door. Most were staying at hotels down in the town where there would be bars they could abuse all they wanted. But not here.

A few close family and friends of Isabella’s *were* staying at the villa, but Helena was optimistic they could avoid them tonight. The bridal suite was at one far end of a wing, with her own bedroom, her father’s and Isabella and Ezekiel’s suite between it and the rest of the villa. Zeke and Flynn had been roomed at the other end of the building but maybe she could persuade Flynn to take her old room. She could get someone to move his work stuff over now, while no one was looking. It would be much easier to keep up the illusion that they were actually sharing the bridal suite that way.

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