

Arranged Marriage

by Sarah Jane Osborne

CHAPTER 23

Contrary to all the crime-fighting women she'd seen on TV as a child, high heels were not for running. Of course those girls never chased down criminals in a full length wedding gown. Lily lay sprawled on the shiny tiled floor of the executive hallway like a sack of potatoes. What felt like a hundred pounds of beading and tulle pinned her to the ground as solid as a pile of rocks.

Out of nowhere Michael appeared.

Of course.

He knelt beside her, holding, what looked like a dead squirrel. "You lost your wig. Anything broken?" he said.

She stared up at him in disbelief. "My pride, a fingernail and apparently my hair." Lily grabbed the offending object from his hand. It did look a little like a squirrel. Weren't wedding days supposed to be magical and romantic? She'd rather have a root canal. Looking back up at her would be rescuer, she asked, "What are you doing here?"

He pressed his lip together, looking as if he were trying hard not to laugh. "Picking up some files? Dropping off some paperwork?"

"Right. Would you please help me off the floor?"

"Gladly." He scooped her up in his arms. The heavy dress didn't seem to give him much trouble. He opened his office door and carried Lily inside. "I don't think I'm supposed to be carrying women in wedding dresses through doorways. Especially women who aren't my

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wife. Bad luck or something.” He smiled down at her with that stupid, smirking grin. The sideways smile that made her heart palpitate. She found it difficult to breathe, and it wasn’t just from her jog.

Wrong man. Not the groom. Focus.

“Put me down, you big oaf. I can walk.” It should have been humiliating to be carried around, but if she was being honest here, Lily liked the way she felt, pressed against his chest with his arms around her, way too much. She needed her space to get her head back together.

“Yeah, I saw how well you can walk.” He dumped her on the ugly gray loveseat, the boring cousin of the one in her dressing room. He pulled up a chair to sit directly in front of her. Their knees almost touched.

“I was running.”

“Looked more like falling to me.” He cleared his throat. “I’ve seen turtles do a better job of righting themselves than you did.”

“And you just happened to be here to scoop me up.” Lily didn’t have a destination when she started running. She just knew she needed to get as far away from her wedding as possible. It was probably not a coincidence that she headed down the hall towards Michael’s office.

He wasn’t dressed for a wedding in his khaki shorts and t-shirt. The chocolaty brown shirt looked soft. She wanted to ball the fabric up in her hands and pull it over his head. The color made his green eyes look mossy. Those eyes currently drilled a hole in her forehead.

Lily had already proved she didn’t have speed and agility on her side, especially from a sitting position, so she decided to stay put. Michael would want to talk about it, and she would have to lie. She gave herself a moment to study him. After she was married, and she was still planning on getting married, she’d just had a small case of cold feet; she wouldn’t be able to look at him like this any more.

So she drank him in, and he loved every second of

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it.

By the time she'd gotten back up to his face, he had a wide grin in place. "Done?" he asked.

Lily nodded.

The man actually smirked. "You and I need to have a serious talk. I'll try a novel new tack with you. The professional route, since I can't convince you to trust me with the truth, and you don't feel guilty enough to quit. Even though you're totally lusting after your boss, I'll appeal to your sense of professionalism. As the producer of this show, I have some concerns about your intentions."

Professional? She said nothing. Just continued to study his face. He hadn't shaved this morning. Lily wanted to run her hand along his cheek. She sighed.

"Lily?" He snapped his fingers directly in front of her face.

"Hmm?"

"Why are you on this show?" He sat back and crossed his arms in front of him. Why couldn't life be easy? Here she was in another gorgeous designer dress and killer shoes. The diamonds Lily wore probably cost more than her house, her hair looked beautiful. Well, it had been beautiful before the squirrel jumped ship. She should be getting everything she'd ever dreamed of today.

Instead, she was getting everything she deserved.

He tried again. "I can actually hear you formulating lies in your head. Would you please, for once, just tell me what's going on here?"

The urge to continue acting like a zoned out dingbat was strong. She could sit there and study him, and keep her mouth closed, and be perfectly happy until he called it to a halt. And he would. Lily didn't want to tell more lies. She didn't want to tell the old lies. She really wanted to just take a nap and wake up to her old life.

The one without Michael.

Her current life didn't have him in it, either. At least in her old life she was safe, Ingrid was safe. Sean was, if not safe, at least responsible for his own ass.

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There was no room for Michael in her current life.

“If you don’t tell me, I can’t help you,” he said softly.

This was it. The gig was up. Any minute now, he’d be calling security, and she’d be escorted out. A twenty-nine year old woman in a wedding gown being escorted out of the building by a couple of rent-a-cops was so pathetic. Lily needed to talk fast. She needed to fix what her brief moment of insanity started.

She channeled her best Bradford smile. “I’m on *Arranged Marriage* because I want to get married. I just had a case of the pre-wedding jitters. Really, I’m fine now.”

Michael snorted at her. “Bullshit. I’ve never seen a woman want to get married less than you do. Why are you really here?”

“If I’m not having any luck at selecting a mate, than maybe all the experts on this show will do a better job. I’m willing to try. My Prince Charming is out there waiting for me, and I’ll live happily ever after.” Oops. She may have gone a little overboard with the Prince Charming thing.

“So you think Bradford is your Prince Charming?” he asked.

“Yes,” Lily nodded vigorously.

“And you’re so excited to be with him, that you started running for you life five minutes before your wedding?”

She continued to nod like an idiot. “Just nervous. All brides are.”

He leaned forward and took her hands.

Lily was surprised at the contact.

His thumbs caressed the skin on the backs of her hands, sending little sparks of excitement through her. His voice was whisper soft. “Cinderella, you’ll be married to this man for the next year. Start thinking about what it’ll be like. You’ll share everything, and a camera crew will be there to catch every moment. A house, friends, the remote control. You’ll be sharing a bed.”

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She looked up at him away from their joined hands. Lily had put off thinking about the bed thing. She'd put off thinking about a lot of things. Being married to Bradford wouldn't be like a bad college roommate. It would be like a bad husband.

"I have to do this." Her eyes welled up.

"Don't do that. Please." He moved to sit beside her on the couch, and pulled her to his side. "I have never met a woman who cries more than you. It's the worst kind of manipulation, you know." Michael pulled her closer. He felt so solid. Lily tucked her head onto his shoulder and gave in for a moment.

"Shh. Look at yourself. You're miserable. You don't have to do this. I don't even want this kind of angst on my show. It'll be a mess, but we'll go with a different couple. We'll have to reshoot everything. Probably set us back a few weeks, but we're not scheduled to go on air until January. It'll be fine. You'll be fine."

Lily dragged herself away from his warmth and looked at him, trying to convey the seriousness of the situation. "You don't understand. I have to do this. No backup couple. Bradford and me. We have to get married."

Understanding registered in his eyes. "You're pregnant," he said flatly, shaking his head. "I thought that...I'm an idiot. That's why you think you have to get married." He stood and walked to the office window, his back to her. "Maybe we can play it off as a wedding night baby."

Lily sat speechless. Pregnant? This man didn't get it.

He paced. "I can't believe you slept with him."

Was that jealousy? She looked around for a tissue. It was time to set the record straight. She finally settled for "something old." The embroidered handkerchief tucked into her bodice that Irene had given her. Lily hoped her dearly departed Granny Burns would understand this was an emergency.

She wiped her eyes and took a deep breath. "I'm not pregnant. I didn't sleep with Bradford. Use your brain.

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I've known Bradford less than a week. I'm not sure if that's even possible. I didn't break the precious chastity clause in the contract. I haven't been sleeping with Bradford or anyone else."

He didn't look like he believed her. How could she blame him? This wasn't exactly a relationship built on honesty. Lily would give him as much as she could.

"Look. I've decided to be straight with you," Lily said. He had wanted to appeal to her sense of professionalism; she'd talk straight business with him.

Michael planted himself directly in front of her, so she had to look up to see him.

"You're not pregnant," he said.

"Not even close."

"What's going on?"

"I need to marry Bradford. You don't need to know why. I'll fulfill all of the contractual obligations. We will be married a year. We will get our money. The show will be a great success. Rah, rah. You'll be picked up again next year, you can start all over again. You can fulfill some other lucky girl's dream. I can't tell you why I'm doing this, but I need to do this. I promise it'll be good television. Everyone gets what they want." Except her.

Michael continued to look down at her. "You don't love him," he said.

"No. I don't even know him."

"You don't even really like him, do you?"

"Not really, but I'll be a good actress."

"This is about money?"

"I'm afraid so." That's as close to the truth as she'd get. The urge to tell him everything was strong; if only so he wouldn't think she was a slimy, gold digger. But she knew Michael by now. If he knew everything, he'd feel obligated to help, and she wouldn't have someone else she cared about involved in this mess. The only help Lily needed from Michael was to not be kicked off the show. She silently pleaded with him.

"You're asking too much, Lily. It's not just about the show anymore, and you know it." He hauled her up by

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the elbows and trapped her in his arms. Their bodies pressed together as much as a corset, several crinolines and an abundance of tulle allowed. She pushed against his chest, his hold on her loosened enough to trap one of her hands in his larger one.

“Is Bradford in on this?” He turned her hand over and stroked the palm with his thumb.

“No.” Lily watched his hand with fascination. She needed to focus. She had a goal here, didn’t she? “I don’t think you should do that.” She attempted to pull her hand away, but his grip tightened slightly. He brought her hand to his mouth and kissed her wrist. Their eyes locked.

“I’ve watched you two. Well, mainly I watched you. There’s no chemistry, babe. You flinch every time he touches you.” He kissed her wrist again. “How do you expect to go to bed with this man in less than twelve hours? You can’t do it. I know you can’t. You’re not like that. You need the spark.”

Her face was inches from his. More importantly, her mouth was mere inches from his. “What are you doing,” she whispered.

He smiled. His gaze moved to Lily’s lips and back up to her eyes. “Getting ready to kiss you.” She felt his other hand slide up her back, slowly over the long line of buttons, settling at the nape of her neck.

“Why?” Her eyes riveted on his mouth.

“To prove a point,” he whispered and closed the distance between them.

Arranged Marriage is available from The Wild Rose Press in [paperback](#) and as an [e-book](#).

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