



It Started at a Wedding... (Harlequin Romance Large Print)

By Kate Hardy

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Sean might have turned his back on romance a long time ago, but somehow Claire manages to slip inside his heart. The trouble is Sean knows that when it comes to Claire one scorching, unforgettable kiss at a wedding just isn't enough...

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Kate Hardy always loved books and could read before she went to school. She discovered Harlequin books when she was twelve and decided this was what she wanted to do. When she isn't writing Kate enjoys reading, cinema, ballroom dancing and the gym. You can contact her via her website: www.katehardy.com

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No.

This couldn't be happening. The box had to be there. It *had* to be.

But the luggage carousel was empty. It had even stopped going round, now the last case had been taken off it. And Claire was the only one standing there, waiting with a small suitcase and a dress box—and a heart full of panic.

Where was her best friend's wedding dress?

'Get a grip, Claire Stewart. Standing gawping at the carousel isn't going to make the dress magically appear. Go and talk to someone,' she told herself sharply. She gathered up her case and the box containing the bridesmaid's dress, and went in search of someone who might be able to find out where the wedding dress was. Maybe the box had accidentally been put in the wrong flight's luggage and it was sitting somewhere else, waiting to be claimed.

Half an hour of muddling through in a mixture of English and holidaymakers' Italian got her the bad news. Somewhere between London and Naples, the dress had vanished.

The dress Claire had spent hours working on, hand-stitching the tiny pearls on the bodice and the edge of the veil.

The dress Claire's best friend was supposed to be wearing at her wedding in Capri in two days' time.

Maybe this was a nightmare and she'd wake up from it in a second. Surreptitiously, Claire pinched herself. It hurt. Not good, because that meant this was really happening. She was in Naples with her luggage, her own bridesmaid's dress...and no wedding dress.

There was nothing else for it. She grabbed her mobile phone, found a quiet corner in the airport and called Ashleigh.

Whose phone was switched through to voicemail.

This definitely wasn't the kind of news Claire could leave on voicemail; that would be totally unfair. She tried calling Luke, Ashleigh's fiancé, but his phone was also switched through to voicemail. She glanced at her watch. It was still so early that they were probably in the middle of breakfast and they'd probably left their phones in their room. OK. Who else could she call? She didn't have a number for Tom, Luke's best man. Sammy, her other best friend, who was photographing the wedding, wasn't flying to Italy until

tomorrow, after she'd finished a photo-shoot in New York. The rest of the wedding guests were due to arrive on the morning of the wedding.

Which left Ashleigh's brother. The man who was going to give Ashleigh away. The man who played everything strictly by the rules—and Claire had just broken them. Big time. He was the last person she could call.

But he wasn't in Capri yet, either. Which meant she had time to fix this.

What she needed was a plan.

Scratch that. What she *really* needed was coffee. She'd spent the last two weeks working all hours on Ashleigh's dress as well as the work she was doing for a big wedding show, and she'd skimped on sleep to get everything done in time. That, plus the ridiculously early flight she'd taken out here this morning, meant that she was fuzzy and unfocused.

Coffee.

Even though she normally drank lattes, this called for desperate measures. She needed something strong and something fast. One espresso with three sugars later, Claire's head was clear enough to work out her options. It meant more travelling—a lot more travelling—but that didn't matter. Claire would've walked over hot coals for Ashleigh. She was more than Claire's best friend; she was the sister Claire would've chosen.

She tried calling Ashleigh again. This time, to Claire's relief, her best friend answered her mobile phone.

'Claire, hi! Are you in Naples already?'

'Um, yes. But, Ash, there's a bit of a problem.'

'What's wrong?'

'Honey, I don't know how to soften this.' There wasn't a way to soften news like this. 'Is Luke with you?'

'Ye-es.' Ashleigh sounded as if she was frowning with concern. 'Why?'

'I think you're going to need him,' Claire said.

'Now you're really worrying me. Claire? What's happened? Are you all right?'

'I'm fine.' Claire had no option but to tell her best friend the news straight. 'But I'm so sorry, Ash. I've really let you down. Your dress. It's gone missing somewhere between here and London.'

'What?'

'I've been talking to the airline staff. They phoned London for me. They said it's not in London, and it's definitely not in Naples. They're going to try and track it down, but they wanted us to be prepared for the fact that they might not be able to find it before the wedding.'

'Oh, my God.' Ashleigh gave a sharp intake of breath.

'I know. Look—we have options. I don't have time to make you another dress like that one, even if I could get the material and borrow a sewing machine. But we can go looking in Naples and find something off the peg, something I can maybe tweak for you. Or I can leave the bridesmaid's dress and my case here in the left luggage, and get the next flight back to London. I'm pretty much the same size as you, so I'll Skype you while I try on every single dress in my shop and you can pick the ones you like best. Then I'll get the next flight back here, and you can try the dresses on and I'll do any alterations so your final choice is perfect.'

Except it wouldn't be perfect, would it?

It wouldn't be the dress of Ashleigh's dreams. The dress Claire had designed especially for her. The dress that had gone missing.

'And you'll still be the most beautiful bride in the world, I swear,' Claire finished, desperately hoping that her best friend would see that.

'They lost my dress.' Ashleigh sounded numb. Which wasn't surprising. Planning the wedding had opened up old scars, so Ashleigh had decided to get married abroad—and the dress had been one of the few traditions she'd kept.

And Claire had let her down. 'I'm so, so sorry.'

'Claire, honey, it's not your fault that the airline lost my dress.'

That wasn't how Sean would see it. Claire had clashed with Ashleigh's brother on a number of occasions, and she knew that he didn't like her very much. They saw the world in very different ways, and Sean would see this as yet another example of Claire failing to meet his standards. She'd failed to meet her own, too.

'Look, I was the one bringing the dress to Italy. It was my responsibility, so the fact it's gone wrong is my fault,' Claire pointed out. 'What do you want to do? Meet me here in Naples and we'll go shopping?'

'I'm still trying to get my head round this. My *dress*,' Ashleigh said, sounding totally flustered—which, considering that Ashleigh was the calmest and most together person Claire knew, was both surprising and worrying.

'OK. Forget Naples. Neither of us knows the place well enough to find the right wedding shops anyway, so we'll stick with London. Have a look on my website, email me with a note of your top ten, and we'll talk again when I'm back in the shop. Then I'll bring your final choices on the next flight back.' She bit her lip. 'Though I wouldn't blame you for not trusting me to get it right this time.'

'Claire-bear, it's not your fault. Luke's here now—he's worked out what's going on and he's just said he'd marry me if I was wearing a hessian sack. The dress isn't important. Maybe we can find something in Capri or Sorrento.'

Ashleigh was clearly aiming for light and breezy, but Claire could hear the wobble in her best friend's voice. She knew what the dress meant to Ashleigh: the one big tradition she was sticking to for her wedding day. 'No, Ash. It'll take us for ever to find a wedding shop. And what if you don't like what they have in stock? That's not fair to you. I know I'll have something you like, so I'm going to get the next flight back to London. I'll call you as soon as I get there,' she said.

'Claire, that's so much travelling—I can't make you do that.'

'You're not making me. I'm offering. You're my best friend and I'd go to the end of the earth for you,' Claire said, her voice heartfelt.

'Me, too,' Ashleigh said. 'OK. I'll call the spa and move our bookings.'

So much for the pampering day they'd planned. A day to de-stress the bride-to-be. Claire had messed that up, too, by losing the dress. 'I'm so sorry I let you down,' Claire said. 'I'd better go. I need to get my luggage stored and find a flight.' And she really hoped that there would be a seat available. If there wasn't... Well, she'd get to London somehow. Train, plane, ferry. Whatever it took. She wasn't going to let Ashleigh down again. 'I'll call you when I get back to London.'

'Please don't tell me something's come up and you're not going to make it in time for the wedding.'

'Of course not,' Sean said, hearing the panic in his little sister's voice and wondering what was wrong. Was this just an attack of last-minute nerves? Or was she having serious second thoughts? He liked his future brother-in-law enormously, but if Ashleigh had changed her mind about marrying him, then of course Sean would back her in calling off the wedding. All he wanted was to see Ashleigh settled and happy. 'I was just calling to see if you needed me to bring any last-minute things over with me.'

'Oh. Yes. Of course.'

But she sounded flustered—very unlike the calm, sensible woman he knew her to be.

'Ashleigh? What's happened?' 'Nothing.'

But her response was a little too hasty for Sean's liking. He deliberately made his voice gentle. 'Sweetie, if there's a problem, you know you can always talk to me. I'll help you fix it.' OK, so Ashleigh was only three years younger than he was, and he knew that she was perfectly capable of sorting out her own problems—but he'd always looked out for his little sister, even before their parents had been killed in the crash that had turned their lives upside down six years ago. 'Tell me.'

'The airline lost my dress,' Ashleigh said. 'But it's OK. Claire's gone back to London to get me another one.'

Sean paused while it sank in.

There was a problem with his sister's wedding.

And Claire Stewart was smack in the middle of the problem.

Why didn't that surprise him?

'Wasn't Claire meant to be bringing the dress with her?' he asked.

'It wasn't her fault, Sean.'

No. Of course not. It would never be Miss Follow-Your-Heart's fault that something went wrong and everyone else had to pick up the pieces.

But he wasn't going to spoil his sister's wedding by picking a fight with her best friend. At least, not in front of Ashleigh. He fully intended to discuss the matter with Claire herself—sooner, rather than later. 'OK. Is there anything else you need?'

'No, it's fine.'

But his little sister didn't sound fine. She sounded shaky. 'Is Luke there with you?' he asked.

'Yes. He said the dress didn't matter and he'd marry me if I was wearing a hessian sack. He says it's our marriage that matters, not the trappings.'

Sean mentally high-fived his brother-in-law-to-be. And thank God Luke was so sensible and reliable. Ashleigh's last boyfriend had been selfish, thoughtless and flaky—and he'd just so happened to be the best friend of Claire's boyfriend at the time. Which figured. Claire always seemed to leave chaos in her wake.

'I could've told you that, sweetheart. Luke's a good bloke and he loves you to bits. Look, I'll be there later tonight, OK? If there's anything you need, anything at all, just call me. And I'm with Luke. Even if you're wearing a hessian sack, you're going to be the most beautiful bride ever.' The bride his father should've been giving away. His throat tightened. If only. But the crash had happened and they'd had to make the best of it ever since. And Sean was determined that his little sister was going to have the wedding she really wanted. He'd *make* it happen.

'Thanks, Sean.' She blew out a breath. 'I'm fine. Really. This is just a little hiccup and Claire's fixing it.'

Yes, Sean thought grimly, because he'd make quite sure that Claire did exactly that.

'See you tonight,' she said.

'See you tonight.'

Sean checked his diary when he'd put down the phone. All his meetings that afternoon could be moved. Anything else, he could deal with in Capri. A quick word with his PA meant that everything would be sorted. And then he called Claire.

Her phone went straight through to voicemail.

So that meant either she was on the phone already, her phone was switched off completely, or she'd seen his name on the screen and wasn't answering because she was trying to avoid him. OK, then; he'd wait for her at the shop. And he'd make absolutely sure that Ashleigh's dress didn't get lost, this time round.

It didn't take Sean long to get to the terraced house in Camden which held Dream of a Dress on the ground floor and Claire's flat on the top storey. Although the sign on the door said 'closed', he could see light inside—meaning that Claire was there, or whoever she'd employed to man the shop in her absence. Either would do.

He rang the doorbell.

No reply.

OK. Play dirty it was, then. This time, he leaned on the doorbell until a figure hurried through to the door.

A figure wearing a wedding dress.

Claire narrowed her eyes at him when she opened the door. Though he noticed that she didn't ask him why he was here. Clearly she had a pretty good idea that he already knew she'd lost his sister's wedding dress and he wasn't happy about the situation.

'I'm Skypeing Ash right now,' she said quietly. 'And I don't want her upset any more today, so can we leave the fight until she's chosen another dress and I've said goodbye to her?'

Claire clearly realised that they were about to have a fight. A huge one. But Sean agreed with her about not rowing in front of his sister. Right now, Ashleigh's feelings had to come first. 'OK.'

'Good. Come in. If you want a drink, feel free to make yourself something. There's tea, coffee and mugs in the cupboard above the kettle, though I'm afraid there's only long-life milk.' She gestured to a doorway which obviously led to the business's kitchen.

'Thank you,' he said. Though he wasn't about to accept any hospitality from Claire Stewart, even if it was do-it-yourself hospitality.

'If you'll excuse me, I have a wedding dress to sort out.' She gave him a level look. 'And I'm modelling the dresses for Ash, which means I'll need to change several times—so I'd appreciate it if you didn't come through to the back until I'm done.'

'Noted,' he said.

She locked the shop door again, still keeping the 'closed' sign in place, and vanished into the back room. Feeling a bit like a spare part—but wanting to know just how Claire had managed to lose a wedding dress—Sean waited in the main area of the shop until she walked back out, this time dressed in faded jeans and a strappy top rather than a wedding dress.

'No coffee?' she asked.

'No.'

She folded her arms. 'OK. Spit it out.'

'Firstly, does Ashleigh actually have a dress?' he asked.

'There are three she likes,' Claire said. 'I'm taking them all over to Capri as soon as I can get a flight. Then she can try them on, and I'll make any necessary alterations in time for the wedding.'

'What I don't understand is how you managed to lose her dress in the first place.' He shook his head in exasperation. 'Why wasn't it with you in the plane?'

'Believe it or not,' she said dryly, 'that was my original plan. I cleared it with the airline that I could put the boxes with her dress and mine in the overhead storage compartments, and if there was room they'd hang Ash's dress on a rail in the stewardesses' cabin. I packed both the dresses in boxes that specifically met the

airline's size guidelines. Your waistcoat and cravat, plus Luke's and Tom's, are packed in with my dress.'

So far, so sensible. But this was Claire—the woman who was chaos in high heels with a snippy attitude. 'But?'

'It turned out there were three other brides on the flight. One of whom was a total Bridezilla and demanded that her dress should be the one in with the stewardesses. There was a massive row. In the end, the captain intervened and ordered that all the bridal dresses should go in the hold with the rest of the luggage—even those belonging to people who weren't involved in the argument with Bridezilla. He wouldn't even let us put the dresses in the overhead lockers. The atmosphere on the plane was pretty bad.' She shrugged. 'The airline staff have looked in London and in Naples, and there's no sign of the box with Ash's dress. They're still checking. It might turn up in time. But it probably won't, so these dresses are my contingency plan—because I don't intend to let Ash down. Ever.'

It hadn't been *entirely* Claire's fault, Sean acknowledged. But, at the same time, she *had* been the one responsible for the dress, and right now the dress was missing. 'Why didn't you buy a seat for the dress?'

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