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Revenge *of the* Wedding Planner

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Revenge of the Wedding Planner
by
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I. Dream Weddings

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Hi there.

Oh, wait a minute.

Just had another text in from Julie.

Fifth one today from Julie, that is.

She needn't worry – I can manage on my own for a few days.

Yes, I did warn the violinists they'll have to wear full-length brown fur coats to the Patterson wedding. And yes, I have hired brown fur coats for all seven of them, in the correct sizes, yes, to be delivered from London in good time for the occasion. And yes, I have checked the coats will be security-tagged and fully insured for their little trip to Carrickfergus.

And, *send*.

God love those poor guys, they don't know what they've let themselves in for. They'll be sweltered playing Tchaikovsky up to their eyeballs in mink but Narnia is *huge* at the moment, theme-wise. Huge as anything, I just can't tell you. At least they won't have to turn up in beaver costumes or appear as wicked elves with long pointy boots on their feet. Both of those ideas were mooted by the bride's mother but Julie put her foot down. She likes a laugh, does Julie, but we always have the reputation of Dream Weddings to think of.

The bride is dressing as the Snow Queen in palest blue fur. With a two-foot-tall delicate silver crown attached to the top of her head with extra-strong elastic. And the groom is going to surprise her with a sleigh on wheels when they come out of the church after the ceremony. Obviously, if it actually snows real snow on the day, we're laughing. And it might just do that 'cos the wedding's on Christmas Eve. But if Mother Nature lets us down, we're going to fill the car park with three tons of rice-paper flakes. No expense is being spared – the bride's family owns an international haulage company. Well, I have to admit Miss Patterson does look exquisite in that blue fur and, you know what they say, you can't take it with you. (And the Pattersons do give a lot of money to charity, so that's okay.) We're even going to make it 'snow' inside the ballroom at the end of the night. Nothing in this business surprises me any more.

Wait a minute, now Julie's texting me about the rice paper. Yes, I have obtained permission from the hotelier to shake bags of paper flakes from the rafters in the ballroom. We've lined up three game teenagers who're going to be dressed as snow-clouds.

And, *send*.

Julie's in New York this week, would you believe? I say this week but really it's only for four days and then she's flying on to Los Angeles with Henri. Henri's a financial whizz and big-time deal-fixer and also Julie's new boyfriend. He's cultured and polite and extremely good-looking. Eyes so dark you'd think they were made of black glass. And muscles! Well, forget about it. Even his muscles have muscles. When I first met Henri I thought

he was gay, his clothes were that perfect. But Julie assured me he definitely didn't play for the other side.

'He's only French,' she said.

I'm sure he has a flaw of some kind but we're still waiting to see what it is. Henri's in New York to set up some meetings with an elite group of art-house film directors and an even more elite group of serious actors (darling), and Julie's there to attend one of the biggest bridal fairs in the developed world.

Oh! There's the phone again.

'Hello. Dream Weddings, can I help you? Our brochure? Of course, if you just give me your address? I'll pop one in the post. Yes, we are very busy at the moment. Fully booked for the next two years, to tell you the truth. Yes, really we are! Yes, you can book now for November 2008 if you forward our little holding fee – it's all there in the brochure. Okay? Lovely. Thank you so much. Cheerio.'

I told Julie not to come back to Belfast with a load of frilly white dresses and traditional veils and posies because we are *so* getting into the fantasy-wedding market these days, it's not funny. Ever since that rock-star wedding we did a few months ago, Dream Weddings has been absolutely inundated with calls. I mean hundreds and hundreds of phone calls and email inquiries from prospective brides and grooms. And even married couples wanting to renew their vows and have another party because they feel they missed the boat, style-wise, first time round. Honestly! The women all wanting Gothic gowns and fairy-tale capes, and kitsch pink limousines and pink champagne, and Victorian black bouquets and I don't know what else. And the guys are binning the top hat and tails and going

for snazzy tailoring. And super-short ceremonies are the order of the day now, with no embarrassing speeches or the endless reading out of dreary telegrams at the reception afterwards. Most of the men we've met would rather die than attempt public speaking so we have a professional speech-maker on our books and he's getting gigs right, left and centre. I'm telling you, it's definitely the end of the white wedding as we know it. Goodbye to the blushing bride and all that.

Today's woman knows what she's getting on the honeymoon. And a good thing too. As Julie always says to me (and only to me, mind you), 'What's the big deal about white weddings anyway? I mean, no woman would dream of buying a car without taking it for a test-drive first.' Julie's words, not mine. 'So why on earth would she throw in her lot with *any* guy before she's made certain-sure he can treat her tenderly when the lights go out?'

And Julie should know. When it comes to men and weddings, Julie Sultana wrote the book. And that's why Julie will never get married herself. Ever. I mean, she says she won't; but I hope she will, one day. For now, though, Julie says she's still looking for Mr Right and she's having a lot of fun doing it, and you can't blame her for that.

Oh, my name is Margaret Grimsdale.

Mags, for short.

I'm Julie's PA at Dream Weddings.

2. Bill and Mags Forever

They say you never forget your first love. I certainly won't. I'm still married to mine. God knows what I ever did to deserve such a scrumptious husband but there you go. Life isn't fair, I suppose. Though growing up in a rain-drenched Belfast in the 1970s must have counted for something. We're from wildly different backgrounds but we compromise on the big issues and we discuss things calmly and we muddle through.

My husband, Bill, was a Punk, you see, when I first met him in 1984 in the Limelight Club. Leaping across the dance floor with some lengths of industrial chain (from the hardware store) round his neck. And I was a Goth in plum lippy and a vintage bridesmaid's dress I'd bought in Oxfam and dyed black in a basin in the yard.

Bill's favourite band back then was the Blades (a Dublin-based outfit) and they're still in his personal top five. According to my other half, the Blades' debut (and as it turned out, their only) album, *The Last Man in Europe*, was the best piece of recorded music ever produced in the Western world. Cover's nice too. Black-and-white moody shot of the band with some derelict gasworks in the background. Very urban decay. Bill had the original album cover framed and it's been hanging in our bedroom for ever. Funny to think that cover is actually older than our children.

Bill was a little bit more sensitive than your average Punk and I was a lot more outspoken than your average Goth and so we managed to bridge the cultural divide. It's not always been easy. Bill has a huge collection of nearly ten thousand vinyl records, twelve bass guitars and four massive amps. And I'm a tidy-freak. But with some built-in shelving in the sitting room and the guitars wall-mounted above the stairs, we've managed to steer a relatively peaceful path through two decades of marriage. It's very hard to dust behind the strings on a guitar and I can't abide dust so Bill switched the light bulbs in the hall to a dimmer grade some years ago, and I have to say I don't notice the dust half as much as I used to.

He insisted the house be painted brilliant white, inside and out, however. All clean lines and modern furniture. The man has a wallpaper phobia. Bill says wallpaper reminds him of people dying of tuberculosis in the 1940s. Expiring in the bed with starched handkerchiefs over their mouths, hushed voices on the landing and all that caper. Doesn't matter if it's that new shiny 'statement wall-covering' that's featured in fancy magazines nowadays, he can't stand it. Ditto, knick-knack cabinets and swirly carpets. I agreed with Bill's decision as long as I could have some colour in the bedrooms. Well, in Alicia-Rose's. She's our only daughter. Our three boys haven't ever been bothered about the decor. So our children grew up in an all-white house except for Alicia-Rose's room which was pink, pink, pink. Compromise, you see: that's the secret of a happy marriage. It also helps if your husband has a cute bubble-butt and lovely smooth feet and is very good at giving erotic massages.

I always knew Bill was in bad form when he got a faraway look in his eyes and started wondering aloud why the Blades didn't make it when the Clash did, and wasn't it a shame they never got the recognition? And Bill knew I had rampant PMT when I took to the bath with a copy of some interiors magazine and a nice glass of Merlot to cheer myself up. Then he'd check the chart we keep on the inside of the wardrobe door with my PMT days blocked out in blue marker, stay out of my way for a day or two and remember to rinse his cereal bowl and put it in the dishwasher and not leave it to dry up on the arm of the sofa. Otherwise he'd get the 'I have to do everything in this bloody house' lecture from me. What I'm trying to say is that we were very much in love. I never thought anything could or would come between us. When you've loved someone for over twenty years you know what they're going to think and say about ten seconds before they do.

It was so romantic, that balmy summer in 1984 when our two worlds first collided. Bill had a short white Mohican and knee-high blue leather boots with steel plates on the shins. And I was going through my 'Granny dress and plaits' phase. But everyone said we looked right together and we were so in love we just knew we could make it work. Think Billy Idol as a sensitive young man teamed with Wednesday Addams as a bolshy teenager and you'll get the general idea. It was all harmless fun, you know, dressing up in the 1980s. There was nothing else to do and no money to do it with. At least we were using our imaginations and not just going slowly mental in front of a computer, like kids nowadays.

The night Bill and I met was simply magical. I was eighteen years old and Bill had just turned twenty. Within five minutes of clocking one another we were oblivious to our surroundings, utterly lost in a passionate kiss. I thought I'd died and gone to heaven. But when Bill walked me home from the Limelight Club we were hassled by a gang of drunken thugs. The usual bad language and colourful threats, will they never get bored of it? I was terrified. Mobile phones hadn't been invented then (or, at least, the ordinary person in the street didn't have one, only the rich-o yuppies in London) and there wasn't a policeman in sight. Bill ignored them for a while but they became increasingly aggressive. He whispered to me to project an image of utter calmness and he asked me if I had anything in my handbag he might use as a weapon – I happened to have a steel comb with a sharp end (they were still legal then) as well as a large can of extra-strength hairspray to keep my blunt fringe straight – and between us we managed to frighten them off.

I say that like it was an equal thing but what happened was, Bill suddenly stopped walking, stood in front of me, waved the comb at the thugs and invited them to have a go.

'You're a dead man, freak!' they shouted.

'Fair enough,' Bill replied levelly, 'but one of you losers is going down with me. Now who's it gonna be?'

Meanwhile, I wielded the hairspray menacingly in the background, hoping I could at least give the rotten creeps some stinging eyes or something. For about two minutes there was an ape-like stand-off with lots of crouching and side-stepping going on. It would have been quite inter-

esting if it weren't for the fact we were about to be murdered. Bill didn't move an inch. I don't think he even blinked. I thought the big, fat thug in the beer-stained tracksuit would have been the first to launch himself on Bill, but then again the smallest one with the darting eyes did look the maddest of the bunch.

'I haven't got all night,' Bill said at one point.

Amazingly, they backed down and we escaped without broken bones. Bill stood his ground until they were out of sight.

'Thank God I didn't have to use this thing,' Bill said as he handed the comb back to me. 'Bunch of sad cases, really.'

'Would you really have stabbed one of them, Bill?' I said to him quietly as we resumed walking.

'Don't know,' he replied after a short pause. 'I could have out-run them on my own, no problem. But I forgot to ask if you were a good runner. Are you?'

'No, sorry. Actually, I'm rubbish.'

'Well, then. Come on, let's get you home.'

I was weak-kneed with relief. And lust.

There were five of those hooligans so obviously they'd picked on us because they thought they'd have the advantage, but Bill has a theory that most violent men have personality disorders too. And that's why they were so angry when they saw us strolling along the moonlit street. Simply because we were happy and they were not. I think Bill had a valid point that night anyway, because when I read this article in a magazine recently I discovered a few interesting facts. Apparently, a rough childhood can lead to the brain being hardwired into negative patterns. So

our thuggy friends probably couldn't 'do' normal life because they didn't have a normal childhood, and 'normality' is a way of life that must be learned *before the age of six*. Imagine that. After the age of six it's too late to change anyone's personality in any major way. Even therapy can only make them aware of why they are the way they are. But it's too late to actually change them.

But anyway, Bill knew how to look after himself on the streets of Belfast after dark and I suppose that's how we managed to have such a great social life when we first got together. We were married just a year after that eventful night and we've been together ever since. We have four children (aged eighteen, nineteen, twenty and twenty-one) and a mortgage nearly cleared. We're law-abiding taxpayers, never been on the dole. It's all very suburban.

Bill's father is English, hence the curious surname. Grimsdale. It's always reminded me of cobbled streets and clay chimney pots. And Norman Wisdom calling out to Mr Grimsdale in those old black-and-white comedies. Do you remember them? When Norman was a milkman? Sometimes I do that when I've spilt a cup of tea over the bed or something. I'll yell, 'Mr Grimsdale! Mr Grimsdale!' in my best Norman Wisdom accent and Bill will come running with a tea towel.

We've only ever had one major disagreement and that was over my boss Julie's recent fling with a barman from County Galway.

Now, Julie Sultana is a terrific girl and for the fourteen years that we've worked together in Dream Weddings she has always been the living embodiment of style, poise

and confidence. I'd be tying my long black hair up with a scrunchie and complaining about the summer heat and she'd be spritzing herself with designer water and wearing sunglasses by Chanel. But when she went off the rails last summer, she really pulled out all the stops. I mean, she did some things I would never have thought of in my wildest dreams. And I've got quite an imagination if I do say so myself. Yes, Julie opened my eyes on several subjects, I can tell you. And that was all the more surprising because I never had her down as the rebellious type. Who'd have thought the sort of person who drives an immaculate white Mercedes convertible with scented tissues in the glove compartment would ever have got up to the sort of shenanigans that Julie did last summer?