



Wedding Babylon
Imogen Edwards-Jones &
Anonymous

About the Book

Why are weddings so expensive? What makes us spend a year's wages on one Big Day? And just how Big does your Day actually have to be? Does getting married on a shoestring make it any less romantic than Daddy dropping a cool £7m and hiring Beyonce?

What are the big no-nos? Do bridesmaids' dresses always have to be so hideous? Why do brides cry? When does Mumzilla turn up? And does the best man's speech really need to be so awful?

Packed with scandal, stories and intrigue, *Wedding Babylon* lifts the lid on the excesses of an industry where emotions run high, money flows like champagne and £3,000 cakes are made of polystyrene. Following a week in the life of a busy wedding planner, and based entirely on true but anonymous stories, Imogen Edwards-Jones takes you behind the scenes on what is supposed to be the happiest day of anyone's life.

Hilarious, shocking and thoroughly entertaining, here is definitive proof that, sadly the course of true love never did run entirely smooth...

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About the Author

Also by Imogen Edwards-Jones

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Wedding Babylon

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CORGI BOOKS

*For Eugenie.
Please can I be a bridesmaid?*

Acknowledgements

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Prologue

All of the following is true. Only the names have been changed to protect the guilty. All the anecdotes, the situations, the highs, the lows, the excesses and the insanity are as told to me by Anonymous - a collection of some of the finest and most successful planners and players within the wedding business. However, for legal reasons, the weddings are fictionalized although the incidents are real and the celebrities play themselves. Narrated by Anonymous, the stories now all take place in a week in the life of a wedding planner. But everything else is as it should be. The brides take centre stage, the mothers try and steal the limelight, and the grooms are bit-part players in a show where everyone else takes their cut. It's just another week in the turbulent and stressful world of weddings.

Sunday a.m.

IT'S THE BIRDS that disturb me first. Their endless bloody twittering has been going on ever since I crawled into bed this morning. And now the sun's pissing me off too. No matter how hard I try to move my head, the glare still manages to bore right to the back of my addled brain. There's no point in trying to sleep. The fact that I don't have the option is, of course, neither here nor there. In a couple of hours I've got to be back on duty, all tits, teeth and Listerine, reminding everyone how fabulous they were yesterday. In the meantime I might try just lying here for another five minutes enjoying these crisp linen sheets.

I close my eyes, but am suddenly enveloped in a blancmange of sheets and pillows and cushions. I am quite literally drowning in comfort. What is it with these posh hotels that they feel the need to cover the beds with so many goddamn soft furnishings? A mop of expensive blonde highlights appears from under the bedding, rapidly followed by an acrid yawn of old champagne.

'Morning,' she mumbles through her pink-stained lips, rubbing black mascara circles around her eyes. 'D'you have any Nurofen?'

'No, sorry,' I say.

'Oh,' she coughs, hacking away at the contents of a whole packet of Silk Cut Ultra stuck in her throat. 'Call yourself a wedding planner?' she sniffs, before flopping back into the pillows.

I didn't mean to fuck the bridesmaid. I was forced to. It was a toss up between her and the matron of honour, and somehow I just couldn't bring myself to do it with Matron. A

friend of mine did that once and it got him thrown out of school. But given the choice between tracking down a minicab at four in the morning and heading cross-country to seek out a two-star B&B with a dragon manning the door, or tiptoeing upstairs with Louise or Abigail, it was no contest. And she was keen. Very keen. It takes a certain type of girl to carry off the missionary position while wearing a baby-pink frilled taffeta dress, and Louise/Abigail did it with great style and gusto. She even broke the bedside lampshade in the process. However, as I sense her hands making their way rapidly towards me underneath the duvet with all the rootling enthusiasm of a bargain hunter at a jumble sale, I think it is time to make my excuses.

‘So,’ I say, leaping out of bed, butt naked. ‘No rest for the wicked.’

‘Where are you going?’ she asks, propping herself up provocatively on the pillows and cocking a bare leg over the top of the duvet.

She has one of those figures you only ever seem to find in the Home Counties – narrow hips, long, slim legs with fine ankles, and the sort of enormous bosom that begins under the chin and ends at the waist. It’s a combination that can prove mightily distracting when poured into pink taffeta and paraded down the aisle, as half the blokes at St Mary’s Church, Walton on Thames yesterday will attest.

‘I’ve got the brunch to organize and the clearing up to supervise. I’m working,’ I say, searching through the debris at the bottom of the bed for my underwear.

‘It’s eight a.m.,’ she sighs, eyeing up my backside. ‘No one will be up for hours.’

‘Shit!’ I say. ‘I am already late.’

I leg it down the corridor, avoiding the collection of untouched breakfast trays and crisp *Sunday Times* newspapers, and head straight down the main stairs of the hotel, buttoning up my shirt as I go. Squinting into the sunlight, I stride across the lawn pretending to exude

efficiency, only to find a sturdy group of Gallowglass boys already hard at work.

Hewn from young, muscle-bound, usually Antipodean stock, the boys from Gallowglass earn about a tenner an hour crewing heavy stuff in and out of weddings, gigs and private parties - anywhere that can afford to pay for an extra pair of hands. Employed for their breezy nature and big muscles, they are cheap and charming, and I couldn't get through a wedding without them.

At last night's reception for 180 people we tried to create some sort of louche bar effect for the guests to retire to after the dinner. We set up a false wall between the dance-floor/bar and the dining room, only for the wall to drop away after the cake-cutting ceremony to reveal a relaxing area packed with sixties and seventies furniture: velvet sofas, glass tables and large free-standing lamps, as well as the couple of wicker swing chairs that I can see two strong-armed blokes are in the process of dismantling.

'Morning!' I nod towards them, pretending that I have been around for at least an hour and am firmly on top of things. 'Careful with that!'

The more bleached blond of the pair smiles through his goatee. 'Keep yer hair on, mate,' he says. 'It's lighter than a Bangkok lap-dancer.'

'And he'd know,' sniggers his mate.

'Good, excellent, keep up the good work,' I reply brusquely, heading towards the marquee.

In the cold light of morning, the tent doesn't look quite so glamorous and decadent as it did last night. The yellow silk lining looks a little jaundiced, what's left of the flower displays hang limp and dehydrated, half the lemon-coloured roses have been pinched, along with the tea lights, and there are hundreds of fag butts squashed into the hand-laid parquet floor. Slim Jim glasses full of half-quaffed cocktails clutter the tables and champagne flutes full of ash lie in all corners of the marquee. What is it with posh people? I

rented thirty-five ashtrays and still no one seems to have been able to find one when they were pissed at two in the morning. There are a few tailcoat jackets left on the backs of chairs, I spot a rejected telephone number scrawled in eyeliner on the back of a menu card curled up under a table and a damp-looking lilac silk handbag lying next to where the ice bar was. Five grand's worth of fun, the slippery blocks were hauled outside by the poor caterers at just after three o'clock this morning in the hope that they would melt quietly around the back.

Walking through the marquee towards the back entrance into the garden, I kick over a high-heeled shoe. Bending down to reunite it with its other expensive-looking half, I notice a pair of black lace knickers underneath one of the tables. I was clearly not the only person to get lucky last night.

'You're late!' comes the startling bark of a familiar voice.

'Shit,' I say, hitting my head on the table. Crawling out, I quickly scrunch up the lace knickers in my hand. Too late.

'I can't believe you're collecting trophies this early in the morning,' says Bernard, shaking his head piteously.

'I am not,' I protest. 'I'm tidying.'

'Stop!' he declares, raising a manicured hand like he has heard it all before - which he has. 'Go and make sure there's enough drink for the brunch. Lord knows where the bloody caterers are.'

Bernard is very well preserved for a single man just the wrong side of fifty. Tall and slim, he exudes all the well-washed, powdered and puffed cleanliness of a homosexual with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. Which he is and has. His shirts are handmade, his shoes are polished daily and his suits are the cr me de la cr me that Savile Row can produce. His golden cufflinks are monogrammed and his watch whispers a quiet elegance. He is very definitely old school. He has buckets of charm, a tongue as sharp as a Tungsten steel razor, and he can spot a misplaced fork at

forty paces. His gimlet eyes are often so narrowed that you could mistake them for a couple of silverfish slithering across a sideboard. His worst vanity – and he has many – is his hair, which despite the constant oiling and combing and tweaking, he insists on dyeing himself. As a result it can shine a gentle plum purple in some – well, actually most – lights.

But he is one of the best in the business. He has been a wedding and party planner for twenty years and in that time he has matched most of the great and not so good in the country. He started back in the days when the most extravagant nuptials were tea, cakes and a flute at Claridge's and everyone was tucked up in bed by ten thirty. Now there isn't a lion-tamer, elephant-handler, pyrotechnic practitioner, sky-writer, ice-sculptor, martini man, bagpiper or flower-petal-wreath-maker whose details he doesn't have in his well-thumbed Rolodex in South Kensington.

There are only four of us at Penrose, in a first-floor office just off the Brompton Road. Bernard is in charge, obviously, and I am his number two. Camilla is our well-connected, somewhat dyslexic secretary, who can book a three-storey marquee almost as enthusiastically as her weekly manicure. The other is Jez, Bernard's slouching, twentysomething nephew with bouffed *X Factor* hair. He spends his days surfing the net, while furiously texting long-legged lovelies who look like they are channelling Peaches Geldoff, and has little or no interest in the wedding industry. Which is a shame, really, as last year the company had a turnover of more than £21.5 million and a profit of just under £2 million.

I can feel Bernard's eyes boring into the small of my back as I head back inside the hotel to check on the booze. All the bottles left over from last night were collected together and locked into a storeroom near the kitchens at the back of the hotel. You have to be so careful with alcohol in the hospitality industry because it is one of the easiest things for light-fingered staff to lift. It is normally counted in and

counted out of the party by either Bernard or me, and locked up in a safe place overnight for use the next day. The host is usually informed as to what has been left over and where it is being put, so there is no accusatory confusion the following day. If the quantity in the cupboard doesn't tally with what the host is expecting, then at least neither the caterer nor anyone from Penrose is going to get the blame. Suspicion usually falls on the marquee team or the band, who are notorious for their ability to sniff out alcohol like meths-fuelled tramps, no matter how carefully it has been stashed away.

Hotel staff are just as bad, though. I should know. I used to be one. Thieving was one of the perks we looked forward to when I was a deputy manager at a provincial luxury hotel and spa near Chipping Norton. The reasoning behind it was, we were working a full-on weekend to a capacity crowd of demanding, short-tempered London types, and the least we deserved was a complimentary bottle of champagne courtesy of the bride and groom. Thankfully, nearly two years ago, Bernard took me away from all that. He was impressed by my people skills (mainly female, apparently) and told me he needed a new right-hand man as his last sidekick was moving on to The Admirable Crichton, or Bentleys, Fait Accompli, Lillingstons, Party Planners, or another of his equally high-profile competitors. I didn't need asking twice.

So now I'm the one keeping an eye on the staff, making sure any leftover bottles of champagne make it through the night. Just the other day I managed to prevent the bar staff at a five-star hotel just off Hyde Park from 'clearing the bar'. I remember this swift move from the not-so-old days, when as the guests move through after their champagne and canapés, the staff very efficiently tidy everything away - quite literally, everything. You turn your back for five seconds and the last six bottles of Krug have magically disappeared. The staff, of course, very conscientiously offer

to let you count the empties out the back. But as any booze thief worth his free bottle of Bollinger knows, you just bring in a few bottles from the day before to make up the numbers.

This morning, however, the stash appears to be untouched. There are a few cases of Veuve Clicquot still unopened and a couple of cases of wine. I remember at the first wedding that I did with Bernard I couldn't quite believe the amount of drink he ordered. While Camilla phoned the list through to Majestic, where we have an account, he explained that on a hot June afternoon you need to allow for between a bottle and a bottle and a half of champagne per person.

'What? Including Granny?' I said at the time.

'Especially for Granny,' he insisted.

He went on to explain that straight out of church, after a long service, the first glass of cold champagne barely touches the sides. It is chugged back in one and you need to refill immediately. The second glass is knocked back with almost as much speed as the first, and from then on, the guests don't care. Any waiter with a bottle will be asked for a refill. So that's a bottle before dinner. And the other half is for the toasts, cake and speeches. He added that a bottle of red and a bottle of white are about enough to get them through dinner, plus a litre of water per person to make sure they can stand up at the end.

'It's a long hot day,' he said. 'You don't want anyone to go thirsty.'

The booze order and quantity also differ from nationality to nationality. The Brits are all about wine and champagne, although there are a few weddings these days where we end up doing a full bar, and during these less affluent times, cocktails are making a huge comeback. More mixers and less alcohol means your cost per head decreases quite significantly. On the whole, the young Russians and their oligarch parents that Bernard appears to be particularly

popular with want vodka. And lots of it. A bottle each, according to Penrose calculations. The Gulf guys want whisky and, as they are not supposed to drink, they get half a bottle each. Their wives are usually on the fizzy drinks or water. And the same goes for the huge Indian weddings, where we cater for half a bottle of gin each for the blokes to add to the same amount of whisky.

‘I trust all is ship-shape?’ says a nasal clipped voice. I don’t need to turn around to know that it is Nigel. Extravagantly tall and exceedingly slim, Nigel has thinning baby-blond hair, a long nose and nostrils so flared that in strong sunlight you can almost see right up to his brain. His catering company, The Lilac Olive, is a well-oiled fine-dining machine that can produce a three-course culinary treat in a car park, ploughed field or any other equally inauspicious venue. Lilac, as it is known in the trade, is Bernard’s first choice when it comes to weddings and, indeed, bar mitzvahs.

‘It seems to have survived the night,’ I say.

‘Mmmm – which is more than I can say for you,’ says Nigel, inhaling through his huge nostrils. ‘You smell cheaper than a rent boy in King’s Cross.’

‘Really?’ I say, sniffing my own armpit. ‘It’s not too bad,’ I lie. It is all I can do to stop my eyes from watering. No shirt or indeed deodorant could survive a fifteen-hour shift at the sweaty coalface of the hospitality industry.

‘Take it from me, you stink,’ he says, taking one polished step backwards. ‘Didn’t you manage to shower this morning? Were they all out of water at the B&B?’

I can tell he is fishing. His pale-blue eyes are fixed on me, darting back and forth, searching my face for signs of an interesting story or a grubby anecdote that he can pass on. For Nigel, despite all his long vowels and clipped consonants, is as bad as any elbow-over-the-garden-gate gossip. In fact, he is worse. His catering company flits, week on week, from wedding planner to wedding planner, and

with him and his pinky-in-a-blanket canapés comes the gossip. You may as well film yourself at it and put your bare arse on YouTube as let Nigel know, because if he gets to hear about something it is round the industry in minutes.

And our industry is quite small. Not fiscally – the UK wedding market is worth £7.5 billion a year (in the States it is a massive \$120 billion) and the average British bride spends between £21,000 and £25,000 on her big day. The most expensive part is the reception hire and the catering, which cost an average of £3,500 and £3,700 each. The engagement ring is on average £1,970 and the dress about £1,200, with the cake costing £260, the flowers £522 and the photographer setting the average couple back £940. Plus a £3,880 honeymoon on top! Bearing in mind that the average yearly wage in this country hovers around the £24,000 mark, this is a significant amount of money. It is a multimillion, multinational market, but those who plan and organize it are few and far between. While there are many local fixers who can certainly put together a pretty good shindig, once you break the £150,000–£200,000 barrier for your nuptials, the bride tends to look towards the capital for advice, where the air is rarefied and populated by the likes of Peregrine Armstrong-Jones at Bentleys, who organized Peter Phillips and Autumn Kelly's wedding, or indeed the legendary Lady Elizabeth Anson at Party Planners, who has been marrying the rich, the famous, the posh and the parvenu for over forty years. We at Penrose are somewhere in the middle. We've done weddings for £30,000 and huge five-day celebrations for £2 million.

Last night's reception will have cost in the region of £160,000, including today's brunch. Sarah, the bride, is David's only daughter, and as a solicitor he has been saving up for his little girl's big day ever since she was born. I don't know what it is about a wedding that makes parents and/or couples think that it is fine and, indeed, necessary to drop the price of a family home on one day – but they do. What

seems an utterly indecent amount of money to spend on a dress, a tent, a cake, some food, booze and a bit of music appears to be totally fine and dandy when the girl is dressed in white and someone mentions love. Thankfully, Bernard and I are on hand to help them spend it.

‘Oh, don’t look now!’ declares Nigel, raising his eyebrows as far as his Botox will allow him – who knew the man was so vain? ‘Here comes the bride, here comes the bride.’ His flat, nasal tones echo embarrassingly about the flagstone hall.

‘Oh, good morning,’ says Sarah, looking at us curiously. ‘What are you doing here?’

‘Just checking there’s enough alcohol for the brunch,’ replies Nigel. ‘You need something to wash down the fried quails’ eggs, blinis and maple-cured back bacon.’

‘Oh, right.’ Sarah stops halfway down the corridor and grabs her head and stomach at the same time, obviously feeling a little queasy.

‘Do you want me to find you something?’ I ask, staring at her long slim legs in her tight white jeans.

‘Would you?’ she asks, fixing me with her large round baby-blue eyes. ‘You angel.’

‘Of course,’ I smile straight back, thinking exactly the same thing.

Five minutes later, the brand-new Mrs Anderson and I are sitting in the Blue Sitting Room while she tries to down half a pint of fizzing Alka-Seltzer. Her bare French-polished toes are tucked up underneath her pert backside, which has spent the last three months having daily workouts at the local Power Pilates studio around the corner.

‘I can’t thank you enough,’ she coughs, as the bubbles go up the back of her nose. ‘It was the best day of my life.’

‘Thank you,’ I nod.

‘But no, really,’ she continues, holding her nose before taking another swig. ‘It really was. I felt like a princess.’

‘Good.’ I smile. ‘You’re supposed to.’

‘And I did.’ She smiles back. Tears are welling up in her eyes as she gently shakes her head, somewhat incredulous at what she has just been through. ‘I really did. It was amazing.’ Two small tears edge gently down her pretty pink-flushed cheeks. She quickly brushes them aside with a flash of her large solitaire-diamond engagement ring. For a stocky bloke with early-onset male-pattern baldness, Mark Anderson has done rather well for himself. ‘D’you think it went well?’

‘Well’ is perhaps not the word I would have chosen. The actual wedding itself was ‘fine’. The service went without a hitch. The vicar got their names right, which is always a bonus, and the car got them to and from the church on time without crashing. Dad David got down the aisle, Sarah looked stunning and all the guests made it to the reception. There was enough food and drink to go around and the couple cut the cake (which these days is no longer a cake but a mountain of profiteroles or Ladurée macaroons), and they both managed to remain sober enough for a first dance, which was thankfully not to Chris de Burgh, or Bryan Adams, or indeed Celine, Robbie, Whitney or Shania, but a new one on me. A country shmaltzy number called ‘Amazed’ by Lonestar, which Nigel reliably informed me later by the cheese platter is the number-one wedding-song choice of the year. I really must get out more, as I’ve never even heard of it. And then everyone went on to enjoy the dulcet croonings of the Frank Sinatra and Dean Martin impersonators.

Anyway, the only thing that let the wedding down was the speeches. For Bernard, whose Obsessive Compulsive Disorder makes him always ask to see the speeches before the big day, this was excruciating. For not only did the groom refuse Bernard’s kind and controlling offer to run through the speech with him a couple of times before the dinner, but he buggered it up. And to compound Bernard’s

itching and scratching and twitching fury at being told to mind his own business, I did manage to persuade the best man, Nick, to show me his speech and thereby avert one of the most tired and twattish openers there is: 'I have been asked to prepare a couple of lines, but I am afraid that I have snorted them both.' This amateur drugs reference joke usually goes over the heads of the parents, amuses those who have been on the stag weekend, and upsets the bridesmaids as well as the bride. It ranks up there with the other foolish best man favourite, which is how much they all enjoyed whoring in Barcelona/Riga/Prague. This sort of casual mention of prostitution tends not to go down well with anyone at the reception and usually leads to tension and rows later on the dance-floor, as the combination of alcohol and deep brooding anger erupts into a big old-fashioned punch-up.

But Mark's opening line was so gobsmacking, it had the whole party catching flies for at least five minutes.

'So she got me here eventually, I guess,' he said as he stood up and shuffled his cards. 'And it wasn't through lack of trying.' It was all I could do to stop Bernard hurling himself across his carefully arranged marquee and tearing the cards out of the bloke's hands. What sort of opening gambit is that? I held tightly on to Bernard's shoulder while he munched his fisted knuckles and the bride's mother, Gillian, started to cry. Abigail/Louise looked appalled. She drained her glass of champagne in one gulp and glared across the table at Matron, who got out of her seat and flounced out of the room in a swish of pink taffeta. In fact, the only worse reaction I have ever seen to the opening few lines of a wedding speech is when the best man at a society wedding I arranged in the South of France pretended to be reading a speech he'd written for a girl the groom had been previously engaged to. That time a whole table of guests had stood up in unison and left the balmy beachside terrace.

It usually takes more than a few sentences to alienate the audience. But Sarah reacted in exactly the same way that the other bride did in the South of France. They both just carried on smiling, looking poised and charming throughout. Perhaps Sarah didn't actually hear him, although she was by far the closest. Perhaps she simply didn't want to.

And Mark didn't stop there. In the name of comedy he went on to detail just how desperate Sarah had been to marry him. He told of her romantic endeavours and her tragic attempts to ensnare him, which culminated in him joking that he had been terrified to kneel down and tie his shoelaces in front of her, for fear that she might shriek out 'Yes!' while he was down there. In terms of fuck-up Mark had gone way beyond the usual forgetting to thank her parents, forgetting to say how pretty his new wife was, or failing to call her Mrs XYZ - which is the usual crowd-pleaser, guaranteed to elicit a friendly cheer. I thought his speech was almost as excruciating as the best man who once congratulated the groom on the fact that his second wife was so much more attractive than his first - when no one else, least of all the bride and her mother, knew he had been married before. But somehow, when it actually came to toasting the bridesmaids, which is who he was supposed to be raising his glass to, Mark managed to get away with it. Like so many things that prove too difficult for the middle classes to deal with, the whole giant embarrassing episode was swept under the carpet. Along with, one hopes, Gillian's dreadful sexy dancing to '(You Make Me Feel Like) A Natural Woman'. And Mark's father's Mick Jagger funky chicken impression. And indeed my sleeping with Abigail/ Louise simply because I couldn't face going back to my cold, miserable shoebox of a room in the neighbouring village.

I have to say, that is one of my major gripes in this business. You'd be amazed how tight people can be when they have a million-pound budget. They will happily spend £35,000 on flowers, but won't shell out on accommodation

for the girls who have to get up at three a.m. to cut and water them and decorate the marquee with them. I know of a very talented florist who flew out to Skiathos for a wedding and stayed a whole week to decorate the church, the reception area and a boat which took everyone from one place to another, only for her and her assistant to be put up in a two-star backpackers' hostel. 'I didn't imagine I'd be in the Four Seasons,' she said. 'But I did sort of suppose that they might look after us a bit.' But then she hasn't been in the business very long. As anyone who has been on the circuit for a few years will say, the last people to be fed, watered and accommodated are those who make the whole thing happen.

Last summer, Bernard and I were running a three-day wedding in Sussex, where the florist and her team of eight had been working for five days, putting in one three a.m. to three a.m. shift. The hosts were supposed to be feeding them breakfast, lunch and dinner. Most of the time they managed to disappear off to the local pub for something, but on the day of the wedding they couldn't. They had been up since five a.m. and had had nothing to eat except some Haribo and coffee, but when the florist asked for some food and the chef handed her a packet of biscuits for her team of eight, the shit hit the fan - or rather the roses were dumped on the ground. After much cajoling and pleading, the girls finally sat down to a three-course dinner including champagne, while the guests were arriving out the front.

It is this sort of treatment that means staff play up. So instead of having everyone report for duty bright and breezy and well rested, we always have slackers who bunk off due to 'illness'. It is amazing how many waiters and kitchen staff can contract flu or a stomach bug after staying overnight in a B&B. Short of following them to the lavatory or actually taking their temperature, it is impossible to call their bluff. At a wedding we did last week, we lost three staff overnight. One had a migraine, which I read as a hangover, since at

least one bottle of rum for the mojito cocktails had gone missing. Another was actually sick, I think for the same reason, and the third had proved impossible to wake. There is only so long you can pound at an unanswered door before both of you get the hint. The girl was obviously not coming out and I was clearly wasting not only my fist but also my time. I had a brunch for 250 to organize. Which is more or less the case this morning.

Sarah drains her glass and stares at me, awaiting my response.

'I thought it was a great wedding,' I say. 'One of the best.'

'Really?' she says, touching me on the back of my sweaty hand. 'You're just saying that.'

Yes I am, I think. But what's a bloke to do? Tell the bride she's married an arsehole when the ink isn't even dry on the register, or indeed the cheque?

'There was one thing,' I suggest.

'Yes?' she says, leaning forward, tugging anxiously on her white T-shirt.

'Actually, I don't think I want to know,' she says, covering her ears.

'It's not a big thing,' I say.

'What then?'

I'm about to tell her I slept with her bridesmaid, but then I think better of it. What is the point of putting a spanner in the works? She may not find it either witty or amusing or indeed clever. Some might say it was highly unprofessional.

'Mark's father . . .' I start.

'And his Mick Jagger impression?' she finishes. 'What is it with every man over the age of fifty? One too many bloody drinks and they think they're in the Rolling bloody Stones.'

'I know,' I say.

'Tragic,' she laughs. 'I am going to miss you,' she says, kissing me on the cheek. It's not a romantic kiss. It is a sweet one. The sort of kiss that pretty girls hand out by way of compensation if you hang on in there long enough,

pretending to be their mate rather than wanting to go to bed with them. Even so, I can feel my ears going red. 'I am going to miss our chats. Our phone calls.' She smiles.

'Daily phone calls,' I add.

'Did I call every day?' She giggles.

'Almost,' I say, getting up from the sofa. Time to get out of here. 'But you know that's my job.'

'And you're very good at it.'

Back in the marquee, Bernard is spitting feathers as he marches around tweaking tablecloths on the trestle tables that have been set up for the buffet.

'Where the fuck have you been?' he hisses under his breath.

'Looking after the bride,' I say.

'Isn't that the groom's business?' He huffs a cloud of potent Listerine at me. 'Meanwhile, I have the hungover mother of the bride on my back, who is wondering where the buck's fizz table is going, what's happened to the quails' eggs and whose knickers you've got hanging out of your back pocket.'

'Oh shit,' I say, pulling the black lace pants out of my trousers. 'I'd quite forgotten about them.'

'Yes, well, get rid of them and get to fucking work.' Bernard strides off in another direction, asking if anyone has seen the bloody photographer.

It's eleven thirty and there are trays of buck's fizz circulating through an elegant, if somewhat hungover crowd, who are all exchanging stories about the night before. Fuelled by attention and adrenalin, Sarah is looking surprisingly fresh-faced as she flits from group to group, collecting compliments. Mark is knocking back flutes of champagne, ducking questions about where he is taking the bride on honeymoon. Suddenly I spot Abigail/Louise coming towards me through the crowd. I have to say, in the cold light of day,

divested of her pink frills and salon curls, she scrubs down rather well. She is wearing a flowered wrap-around dress that shows off her slim legs and narrow hips. I can't believe I got quite so lucky after all.

'Hello there,' she says, plucking a glass of champagne off the tray of a passing waiter. 'Working hard?'

'Very,' I say.

'You look rushed off your feet,' she says, running a pink frosted fingernail down the front of my white shirt. I feel my heart suddenly beat a little faster. Wow, Abigail/Louise is certainly a girl who knows what she wants. 'So.' She pauses. 'Just so you know, I had fun, I hope you had fun. But what goes on tour, stays on tour. I don't want you phoning me - OK?'

'Yes,' I squeak like a bloody mouse. I clear my throat. 'Of course, whatever you want.'

'Just make sure Sarah doesn't find out,' she says, narrowing her eyes like she is checking I haven't told the bride already.

'Whatever you say.'

"'Whatever you say, Amanda,'" she imitates. *Amanda?* Since when has that been her name? 'You sound a little bit pathetic, if you don't mind me saying so.'

'Amanda!' A pink-faced bloke with no chin waves across the marquee.

'Not a word,' she hisses, smiling and waving back across the marquee. 'Roger! Darling! How lovely to see you . . . Now tell me, how's the City?'

She leaves me standing next to the buffet, somewhat bemused and wondering where to put myself. I am thinking of sneaking off for a steeling cigarette before I start organizing the jazz band and making sure Gillian has enough to drink, when I see Bernard striding into view.

'Why are you still here?' he barks.

'Um, I'm in charge,' I say sarcastically.

'Well, actually, I'm the boss and you're my sidekick, so don't ever forget that,' he says, running his neatly filed nails through his plum rinse. 'Haven't you got a meeting in town?'

'Oh, fuck,' I say.

'Indeed,' replies Bernard. 'You'd better bugger off, hadn't you?'

Sunday p.m.

WHAT SORT OF person makes an appointment at Claridge's on a Sunday afternoon in June? It's sunny and hot and a Sunday - who wants to discuss business on a hot, sunny Sunday?

'They must be very busy,' Camilla suggested at the time of booking.

'Or just bored,' Jez added helpfully.

Either way, I have driven like a bastard up the motorway, power-eating crisps and prawn sandwiches off my lap, while downing as many full-fat Cokes as my hungover and slightly acidic stomach will allow. I drop into my sad, neglected bachelor flat, which is clearly in need of the love of a good woman - or even man, for that matter. But as I tell my mum, who occasionally drops by to do my socks, I am almost never there, there is no point in buying food as it only goes off, I use the place to sleep and shower and that's it. I bought the flat because it was small and cheap and didn't need much looking after. Just over the river in Battersea, it is on a bus route, has reasonable views and a porter to sign for my parcels. I don't need much else. I had a girlfriend who once made the terrible mistake of giving me a goldfish. I'm afraid it died quite swiftly afterwards. I had to oversee a five-day wedding in the South of France and by the time I got home I found it floating on top of the water. I am not sure what I'd done. I'd scattered a pile of food in the water in case it got hungry, but apparently that was the problem. My girlfriend told me I had poisoned the thing. But I am not sure what else I was supposed to have done.

Anyway, I am in and out as quickly as I can and head off to Claridge's, Richard James suited, Paul Smith booted and a