

The Wedding Dress

I tapped on the door, then pushed it open. Charlene had her back to me, white lacy underwear with suspenders. She spun round as she heard me come in.

“Where the hell did you get to?” she spat.

“Just went to check on Dave, and get my make-up.”

“Can’t that husband of yours look after himself?”

I ignored the slight, she was overwrought, this was her wedding day after all. Charlene’s aunt Janet sat hunched over by the window, Tara at her feet supplying pins and scissors as required.

“Don’t you think this curl goes the wrong way?” Charlene twisted one from the cascade piled on top of her head.

“It looks lovely, really.” I smiled over her shoulder so she could see me in the mirror.

“I don’t know why I’m asking you,” she muttered, “you don’t have to do anything with your hair.”

She was right, my boyish crop was easy, a quick wash and perhaps a bit of wax worked through on the ends of my fingers. It looked good today, I was pleased, the bridesmaid’s coronet would sit neatly on top.

“Well don’t just stand there, can’t you do something?” Charlene tossed her head angrily towards her aunt.

I knelt down next to Tara and took the needle and thread from aunt Janet’s fingers.

“I’ll thread it.”

“Thanks dear,” she barely smiled, the strain of the last few weeks had taken its toll. Her eyes looked hollow rimmed with black shadows, her cheeks were red and hot, sweat standing on her top lip. The poor woman had been working so hard to get this masterpiece finished. A design that Charlene and aunt Janet had devised together but one that Janet had unwittingly agreed to make. She hadn’t bargained for the million minute alterations that Charlene demanded, or the hours of overtime that her job had acquired recently. I dreaded to think how much sleep she had had in the last few days.

“God, isn’t there even a drink in here?” Charlene glanced around the suite and then looked pointedly at me.

“There’s some water on the side,” I responded.

“Water? God, I could do with something stronger than that.”

Tara and I shared a secretive look.

It seemed that nothing I did these days satisfied Charlene. In fact looking back, the last time I really remembered laughing with her was when we went to choose a dress for my wedding a year ago. I tried on all sorts of things from medieval puff sleeves to slinky short numbers better suited to a nightclub. With the help of a bottle of wine or two decanted into water bottles, the day got merrier and more raucous as we went. We were thrown out of one shop when Charlene couldn’t stop giggling at a scarlet dress that was wider than I was tall. The dress that I did finally buy, I found a week later with my mum off the old Crosswell Road. The next time Charlene came round, I tried it on for her, and watched her face quiver, a look that at first I didn’t recognise, she covered it up well of course. It wasn’t until my wedding day that I realised what that look had been: jealousy. At first I’d been angered, why would she be jealous of me and Dave? She hated Dave and besides she was together with Paul, had

been for ages. But I guess I felt pity for her, after all, a wedding was what she had wanted all these years, not me.

Charlene surprised us all when Dave and I returned from honeymoon announcing that her and Paul were engaged. I didn't think Paul was the settling down type, too rougeish, often unreliable, but his family and money seemed to make up for that, at least for Charlene with her enormous diamond.

"We could do that mum," Tara interrupted my thoughts. Aunt Janet had finished the delicate embroidery and all that was needed now was a last bit of tacking to connect the lining to the outer of the bodice.

"Yes," I added, "why don't you get ready, this bit is easy."

Aunt Janet sighed and nodded, by the look of her, the last thing she wanted to do was go to a wedding. She gathered her things and disappeared into the bathroom. Charlene appeared at our shoulders.

"What's she doing in my bathroom," she hissed at us, "can't she go to her own room, this is the bridal suite after all."

I could see Tara tensing, ready to defend her mother.

"I'm sure she won't leave a mess, her and Uncle Geoff are on the top floor, she'll be quicker here," I soothed.

Charlene scowled and turned away, she walked carefully down the few steps to the sitting room. She looked like a high-class whore with her perfect underwear and bridal shoes. She went through and I heard her ordering up some red wine.

"You start from that end and I'll start from this," Tara passed me a needle, "why don't you sit on the chair, you'll be more comfortable." She nodded at my swollen belly and I agreed.

A knock at the door followed by Charlene shouting from the other room.

"Sarah, get that, it's the wine I ordered."

I duly did as I was bid and took the tray with four glasses into the sitting room. Charlene half lay along one of the sofas, smoking a cigarette.

"What are all those glasses for?" she asked.

"You're not supposed to smoke inside," I nodded at the ancient beams.

"Oh, don't be so boring and pour us a drink."

I carried two glasses back through for Tara and me and left one on the side for Aunt Janet.

"Don't you dare spill that on my dress," Charlene hollered as I negotiated the couple of steps.

Tara had finished the last stitch and was tying a final knot.

"It's finished." Tara trilled with a big smile.

"About time too. Is Aunt Janet out of my bathroom yet?" Charlene remained hidden in the other room.

"Not yet."

"Well I'm not putting it on until she's given it her final approval. You might have missed something." She stood in the doorway with the wine in one hand.

"Fine," I muttered. "At least we can get dressed."

Tara and I slipped into the matching bridesmaids' dresses and fussed in the mirror over our make-up. I could feel Charlene's eyes drilling into the back of my head. What on earth was she upset about now?

Tara stood in front of the long mirror adjusting the dress slightly, with the coronet of flowers in her golden hair, she looked absolutely gorgeous. She had the perfect figure, not surprising for someone who danced five nights a week. I only met her for the first time at the hen party but since then we'd seen each other four or five times. I liked her. She had an easy way about her and she thought Dave was a great catch. We'd met in town a couple of times for lunch,

she worked in the Lloyds building only round the corner from my office. She was always asking me about the baby, if it was kicking, how I felt. Not like Charlene, who never mentioned my bump. Not since I'd first told her and she had almost choked on her cappuccino. Charlene was watching Tara in the mirror, that look in her eye that I had seen so often recently. The bathroom door clicked open and Janet came out, there was a shriek and then something thudded onto the floor. It was Charlene's wine glass.

"Oh my God," screamed Charlene.

Tara stood quite still, red wine dripping from her face, and a large stain spreading across the front of the bridesmaid's dress. Tears welled in her eyes.

"What did you do?" I shouted at Charlene, but I already knew. She had removed the competition.

She stammered. "I didn't mean to, it was her" she pointed at Aunt Janet. "She startled me coming into the room like that." Huge crocodile tears rolled down her face. "My wedding," she moaned, "my bridesmaids".

"Look we can wash it out, get some white wine on it."

"No." Charlene responded quickly. The tears seemed to be drying instantly. "It's ruined, it's no use, I won't be able to have any bridesmaids at my wedding." She let out a great wail.

Aunt Janet meanwhile guided Tara silently into the bathroom.

"Of course you will, my dress is fine, look." I showed her, giving a twirl in the mauve chiffon.

"Don't be stupid," she turned to me with a menacing look, "I can't have just one bridesmaid, that would look pathetic, and you're pregnant. How do you think that's going to come out on the photos? One pregnant bridesmaid. No, I'll have to go without." She straightened up her shoulders as if accepting some great punishment.

"Look at the time, I need to get dressed, where's Aunt Janet to check your handiwork?"

Charlene had moved on already. I stood open-mouthed not knowing what to say.

Aunt Janet appeared and came over to the boddice. She picked up the garment and studied it carefully, picking up the scissors she made to snip at a dangling thread. She jabbed the scissors at it and nicked the lining. I could see her hand was trembling slightly. She caught my eye and I could see the smoke rising from her nostrils.

"Here, you do it," she thrust the garment and scissors at me, "cut the ends off any long threads you find. I need to find my daughter something to wear." It lay in my hands, that exquisite boddice. The result of so many hours work, so many fraught moments. I watched Charlene busy checking her mascara in the mirror. My best friend.

Tara and I stood near the back, me in jeans, and Tara in a spare skirt her mum happened to have brought with her. Charlene would no longer be my best friend. In fact she probably wouldn't ever want to see my face again after today. We watched with quiet expectation as Charlene walked down the aisle. A hush enveloped the crowd as this beautiful creation moved between them. Already at the back of the boddice we could see a tiny patch of skin as the stitching loosened. The more she moved the more my nifty snips would reveal themselves.

We waited, Tara and I, through the ceremony and the hymns. We saw Charlene's mother frowning at Aunt Janet's serene face as even she could see something wasn't right. It was only a matter of time. The vicar pronounced them man and wife and they embraced with a brief kiss. As Paul released his grip and pulled his hands away it looked as if he pulled the boddice with him. It slid to the stone floor. Charlene's screams rolled across the pews joining the joyous clanging of the church bells.